University of Alberta

"*Russian Noir*:" Chernukha Phenomenon in Post-Soviet Fiction and Film

by

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Abstract

The dissertation examines the chernukha phenomenon in contemporary Russian literature and cinema. Having diverse cultural connotations in Russian culture (from obscene and pathological to unethical and marginal), chernukha has primarily established itself as an art trend with *noir* vision: focusing on dark and depressing social phenomena such as alcoholism, poverty, abuse and other topics tabooed by Soviet ideology and which started being addressed during the perestroika period. The dissertation defines the core characteristics of chernukha and determines how the discourse of the marginal is channeled by art. The central argument of the thesis is that chernukha art bears an essentially transgressive nature that allows it to transcend genres, trends and temporary confinements (those of the immediate post-Soviet context). Chernukha artistic language continues to appear as a method of channeling the ugly and the abject through negative excess and radical rejection of culturally inscribed values, communicational breakdown and representational failure.

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Note on Transliteration

The system of transliteration used in the thesis is Library of Congress except for titles of works, names of authors and quotations, which use a different system.

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Introduction

In the present work I would like to analyze the artistic phenomenon of "chernukha" existent in contemporary post-Soviet and Russian literature and cinema. The name "chernukha art" was first established in film criticism, indicating a tendency in the cinema of the perestroika period (1985-1991) to concentrate on the former taboo zones of Soviet ideology (prostitution, poverty, alcoholism, sex, violence, the criminal underworld, drugs) as well as on negative visions of the Soviet past (repression, corruption). Subsequently, chernukha in literature constituted a corpus of texts with similar intentions: a neonaturalist depiction of the inequities of an unstable society and the misfortunes of its marginalized individuals.

The term "chernukha" is a colloquial Russian expression derived from the root "black" and could be roughly translated as "blackness" with an explicitly negative connotation. The Ozhegov Dictionary of the Russian language offers the following definition of chernukha: "Exposure of the dark and gloomy sides of life and day-to-day existence (colloquial, disdainful)." [Показ тёмных, мрачных сторон жизни, быта (прост. пренебр.)]

For the title of my thesis I have chosen to define chernukha as "Russian *noir*," because of the translation of *noir* as *black* from French and most of all because the term "noir" has a cinematographic history. *Film noir* was a film trend in the 1940s in the United States of America that also presented a negative, "dark" vision of reality. There are a few intersecting points between *film noir* and chernukha that might allow the expansion of future research of chernukha into the domain of comparison. Both trends owe their historical origins to a period of social crisis (after World War II in the United

States and perestroika in Russia); both trends are thematically linked through excessive negative vision, concentrating on the marginal and the criminal aspects of urban life, creating dark stories with a depressing mood; both *film noir* and chernukha film have literary counterparts. Finally, both trends share problematic definitions, which do not allow the phenomena to be firmly placed within the realm of genre, cycle or style. The phenomena of *film noir* and chernukha are not identical but they may share some core characteristics that will highlight the nature and roots of both trends, which I hope to address in my future research, defining chernukha and *film noir* in the context of the "noir" as a larger and more general cross-cultural phenomenon.

Chernukha as a colloquial expression and the name for an art trend has many discursive connotations within Russian culture. It is: (1) a colloquial expression referring to social taboo zones, marginal experiences connected with immorality and obscenity; "hardcore" pornography (*chernukha-pornukha*); criminality; (2) unethical journalism and "black" PR in media; and finally, (3) a trend in Russian cinema and literature that came into being in the late 1980s-early 1990s during the Glasnost era and addressed the negative and marginal aspects of transitional society. I intend to examine the chernukha phenomenon as it is manifested in art, specifically in fiction and film.

Criticism on chernukha art was produced mainly by film scholars in Russia and in the West. It describes chernukha as a semi-genre, lacking formal innovation, the genre that zooms in on the ugly and sick aspects of society, such as decaying morals, marginal statuses, disintegration of the family and criminality (Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky, 1992). Anna Lawton (1992) describes chernukha as having "dark" and "obscene" content which strives to shock the public and does not have anything to offer apart from the desire to scandalize. This quality defines chernukha as cheap naturalism dwelling on societal ills. Seth Graham (2000) argues that chernukha was the "inversion of the melodramatic impulse" characterized by naturalist physicality. I will discuss chernukha film criticism in more detail in the corresponding chapter.

Literary criticism on chernukha is much scarcer. Most relevant studies concerning chernukha thematics and style are those of "tough and cruel prose" (Brown, 1993; Shneidman 1995), which correspond in many aspects to chernukha but cannot be wholly identified with it. The nature of "tough and cruel prose" is mainly attributed to the social conditions of perestroika, when the former taboos were lifted and writers could address topics concerning the problematic sides of Soviet life (previously concealed by the Socialist Realist mode) as well as denounce the crimes the regime has committed. Mark Lipovetsky (1999) makes a similar point in defining the chernukha art mode as a means of legitimizing the muted discourse of phenomena that had been oppressed and ignored by Soviet ideology, such as drugs, criminality, domestic abuse, etc. I will provide a more detailed critical overview of the literary criticism in the first chapter.

Critics also admit that chernukha art has close ties with the artistic movement of naturalism. Traditions of the natural school in Russian literature of the 19th century, those of formation of the individual by social environment, along with strategies of depicting "typage" and attention to everyday detail [*byt*], are attributed to chernukha as well (Mark Lipovetsky, 1999; Konstantin Kustanovich, 1992). In general, both film and literary criticism share the same assumption that chernukha art could be exhaustively defined within the limits of the perestroika era (due to its breaking of taboos and denunciatory tone typical for the glasnost period) and confined to neonaturalist societal critique (due to its thematic focus). This way criticism limits not only chernukha's operational field, but also renders itself open to content-oriented analysis, confining chernukha art to "what" it talks about, namely the "grime and slime" of chernukha thematics.

I argue that the chernukha phenomenon in Russian literature and film is far more complex than is usually perceived through content analysis. My premise is grounded in the broad discursive presence of the term "chernukha" in various aspects of contemporary Russian culture, such as media or politics. I intend to demonstrate that chernukha in contemporary Russian literature and film possesses an essentially transgressive nature, which transcends the boundaries of any specific genre, school or time period. It constitutes the formal stylistic component of diverse texts rather than a content oriented textual mechanism.

In order to demonstrate my point I have chosen diverse texts for analysis. The criterion for my choice was the diverse statuses of the works analyzed. Thus, for my literary analysis in the first chapter I have chosen works by Viktor Astafiev (the novella *Liudochka*, 1989), a novel by Vladimir Makanin (*Andegraund ili Geroi Nashego Vremeni* [Underground or the Hero of Our Time], 1998) and a novella by Liudmila Petrushevskaia (*Svoi Krug* [Our Crowd], written in 1979; published in 1989). Viktor Astafiev's text is a more conventional chernukha of the perestroika period work which inherits much from 19th century naturalism and subscribes to the conventional denunciatory and taboo-breaking thematics usually attributed to chernukha. Vladimir Makanin's novel presents a more borderline case, combining the intellectual novel with chernukha intended for mass consumption (Mark Lipovetsky). Liudmila Petrushevskaia's texts belong to the category of "high art," which is rarely attributed to the chernukha art mode, defined instead as cheap, sensational and lacking innovation. The texts are spread in a vast timeframe: from the text by Petrushevskaia unpublished until 1989 to a perestroika text (Astafiev) and more recent text by Makanin. However, they all relate to the perestroika and immediate post-Soviet context: either by the fact of publication (Astafiev and Petrushevskaia) or by its subject matter (Makanin's novel deals explicitly with the early post-Soviet times and positions itself as a text of the transitional period).

In accordance with the same principle in the second chapter, I chose the following films: firstly, the cult chernukha of the perestroika period production *Malenkaia Vera* [Little Vera] (dir.Vassily Pichul, 1988), which displays all characteristics of the chernukha art mode attributed to that art mode by the existent criticism, secondly, the more ambivalent production *Taksi Bliuz* [Taxi Blues] (dir. Pavel Loungine, 1990), which combines genre cinema and chernukha characteristics. I finish my analysis with the "elitist" production *Krug Vtoroi* [The Second Circle] (1990), by the "art cinema" director Alexander Sokurov. All films belong to the perestroika and early post-Soviet period (1989-1992), with the exception of *Priiatel Pokoinogo* [Friend of the Deceased] (dir. Viacheslav Krishtofovich, 1997), which I briefly touch upon and which is more characteristic of early chernukha films, as pointed out by criticism (see Graham's list of chernukha films).

In the last chapter I intend to examine more recent texts by the conceptual postmodern writer Vladimir Sorokin *Zasedanie Zavkoma* [Next Item on the Agenda] (1997) and contemporary director Alexei Balabanov (*Brat* [Brother], 1997) to investigate the implications of chernukha in contemporary art detached from the perestroika period.

I argue that the transgressive nature of chernukha justifies its transfer and evolution into the artistic mode of postmodernism, preserving the same core characteristics, which were developed in chernukha of the perestroika period in its various forms. My objective is to trace those differences and similarities that develop in the course of that transgression. Although Sorokin's story is written in the same year as Makanin's novel, the two differ significantly. If Sorokin's text could be classified as postmodern and operates its conceptual conventions, Makanin's novel is grounded in the realist tradition and explores the subject matter characteristic for perestroika and early post-Soviet chernukha literature.

Regarding my choice of authors, I acknowledge the fact that the list could probably be expanded and enlarged. Thus, along with Liudmila Petrushevskaia one could probably include such authors as Valeriya Narbikova, Evgeny Popov. Viktor Astafiev's novella could be compared with the works of authors like Sergey Kaledin. Conceptual postmodern chernukha could be expanded to include the oeuvre of Egor Radov and Nikolai Koliada. In film *Little Vera's* "comrades-in-arms" can be found in abundance (I mention similar chernukha productions in the chapter), *auteur* chernukha cinema by Sokurov is comparable with the works of Kira Muratova. Loungine's and Balabanov's experiments with genre call to mind the films of Sergey Soloviev and other more recent productions like the hi-tech thriller *Anti-Killer* (2002) by Egor Konchalovsky.

My other criterion for the choice of the texts analyzed was the existence of some criticism that deals with the works, which makes my choice not completely arbitrary (the exception is "postmodern chernukha"). The most important criterion was the extent to which the texts could vividly exemplify the given problem. Thus, there was the task of tracing the same stylistic and thematic patterns in texts analyzed in order to define the transgressive mode of chernukha using diverse texts. Due to the lack of space and the need to scrutinize sometimes elusive features in diverse chernukha works I chose to concentrate on one text at a time. In the future, research on the full range of authors and the ways in which they modify the chernukha mode will be productive in expanding the study of the chernukha phenomenon.

In the present work I identify the characteristics in those diverse texts that will help to define chernukha as a unified movement and an artistic vision that is characterized not only by thematic homogeneity but also by its own cinematic and literary language. I argue that chernukha represents a stable pattern of thematic and formal features, distinctly recognizable in the literary and cinematic medium. The core defining characteristics of the phenomenon could be classified as follows: the taboo-breaking orientation of chernukha texts including subversion of culturally inscribed values and the negative excess that chernukha employs. The mode of negative excess could be manifested through intensified physicality and body-related imagery/discourse as well as through the formal system of the work by emphasizing descriptive and repetitive qualities of the style within the text instead of plot development. Chernukha as a mode of negative excess consists of a drive towards the violation of taboos, subversion of all values and the destruction or undermining of the representational power of society and culture to inscribe meaning into the dark world of chernukha. The representational failure manifests itself in communicational breakdown and failure of speech, which ranges from misunderstandings among the characters of chernukha texts to communicational breakdown on the level of reader's interpretive effort, as in works by Petrushevskaia.

The core quality of negative excess that characterizes chernukha is conceptualized by the theories of taboo and transgression by Georges Bataille and the theory of the abject by Julia Kristeva (1982), which will serve as a theoretical basis for understanding the chernukha phenomenon.

Georges Bataille develops the notion of taboo and transgression in connection with his interest in marginal or illegitimate phenomena within social structures, such as violence, eroticism and death. As opposed to social reason and the economy of work and conservation, those marginal states represent the domain of excess and disorder. Bataille writes, "most of the time work is the concern of men acting collectively…and the collective has to oppose those contagious impulses of excess" (*Eroticism*, 41). Drawing on the anthropological studies of Marcel Mauss, which describe the taboo-breaking rituals among "primitive" peoples, Bataille develops a theory of taboo and transgression as an inherent part of the functioning of the social system. Taboo, according to Bataille, is designed to be violated, as attested to by the legitimate rituals overthrowing the powers of social order. Therefore, taboo bears an ambiguous character, which is such that the drive for transgression is included within the structure of taboo. Bataille asserts that "the transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it" (Ibid., 63). Transgression of taboo is intertwined with the limit, and by pushing through the limit, it asserts its social prerogative. Therefore, Bataille introduces the notion of transgression, which is "complementary to the profane world, exceeding its limits but not destroying them" (Ibid, 67), analogous to what Bakhtin conceptualizes in carnival culture.[1]

However, Bataille's transgression, even inscripted by its limits, is still an excessive and dangerous vision. Unlike Bakhtinian carnival, which is a historically (Middle Ages, Renaissance), temporally (temporary suspension of hierarchy for the festive days) and socially (appealing to common roots of mythological and archaic elements) bound transgression, Bataille's vision of transgression is more internalized as a psychological (and psychoanalytic) dilemma. In other words for Bataille transgression is related more to the "inner experience" of *conditio humanis* rather than any external experience of the temporary abolishment of social rules. The sites of transgressive excess for Bataille are manifested through marginal rituals but are rooted in internal drives, psychoanalytically understood as attraction to death, sexuality, obscene and violent phenomena. Bataille specifically mentions the topoi of death, sexuality, violence and bodily functions (such as excretion) as sites of transgressive excess. Michel Foucault, in his *Preface to Transgression* (1977) compares transgression to the lightning that divides (and thereby defines) and also shows the darkness that surrounds it. Taboo and transgression do exist in reciprocal definition, meaning that transgressing taboo also entails deferring its inscription. That creates an open space where the negative excess expands the limits of the ordinary. The chernukha phenomenon therefore functions in this double gesture. On one hand, as a form of art it is a way of encoding the negative excessive drives (channeling the abject), at the same time the excessive negative impulse defines chernukha as a destructive mode that subverts cultural representations and communicational models.

Similar to Bataille's conceptualization of negative excess, which violates culturally inscribed norms, Julia Kristeva conceptualizes abjection. She defines the abject as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4). It is what disgusts us with a norm-violating image or sensation (thus, the image of death – a rotting corpse – is an ultimate abjection, violating our right to live). Chernukha phenomenon is generally grounded in the abjection of the norm (be it social, aesthetic or moral). However it is not amoral, promoting evil or negative values, but rather dwells beyond the distinction, transgressing ideological boundaries (that is why, as Kristeva notes, the abject is cynical, sinister and beyond the idea of resistance). Thus, the chernukha art mode is endowed with excess as its defining characteristic, manifested through violation of any sort of norm and cultural inscription. The excessive drive of chernukha art is developed through the presence of the abject, which is "neither subject nor object," but the anti-representational primal reality that violates social order and stability of cultural semiosis.

I argue that the chernukha art mode is characterized by a distinctive artistic language and not just marginal themes. That is why I place the focus of the analysis on the formal aspect of narrative development and presentation. I rely on the methodology developed by the Russian Formal School, namely the theory of defamiliarization and recognition (Shklovsky's *Art as Technique*, 1917) and the difference between story and discourse (*fabula* and *siuzhet*) developed by Boris Tomashevsky (1932). In my opinion, what matters in the chernukha art mode is not "what" happens (*fabula*) or what topics are touched upon but "how" the narration unfolds and presents itself as chernukha (*siuzhet*).

Besides the Formal School I will also utilize narratological methodology for my analysis of fiction and film. Specifically, I will employ Seymour Chatman's concept of three text-types and his theory of description in cinema (1990) as well as Michael

Riffaterre's concept of repetition as reinforcement of the message conveyed by the narrative (1990). I will also briefly refer to Norman Friedman's classification of narrative instances (1975). On the larger scale of film analysis methodology I will take David Bordwell's and Kristin Thompson's concept of film form (1979). Form for Bordwell and Thompson is a set of interrelated functions, devices and principles, according to which the film is made and perceived as a whole. Form also includes cultural (or social) conventions, generic expectations and formal principles.

As a result of my investigation of the definition of the chernukha mode I hope to establish how the core characteristics of the chernukha mode function within a diverse range of texts, transforming naturalist chernukha from the rise of perestroika into a postmodern functional mode within the trend. I intend to establish a few types of chernukha that reflect the transgressive nature of the chernukha phenomenon but still conform to its conceptual unity as an art mode. Those different types are consequently presented in the chapter on literature, film and postmodern aesthetics.

Thus, in the first chapter I discuss the evolution of the chernukha mode from neonaturalist chernukha as presented in Viktor Astafiev's text, which is still dependent on the naturalist tradition of the 19th century and is oriented towards the exposure of societal evils and denouncement of the Soviet regime. The negative excess mode functions in the works of Astafiev as a component of the peculiarities of his style, when the intensified descriptive quality of his narration creates an excessive effect of marginalized reading pleasures.

The next type of chernukha is represented by Vladimir Makanin's novel, which is a borderline case. Having some things in common with the natural school tradition (like a focus on social types and the typical situations of marginal character), the novel is already removed from naturalism by subjective narration and strategies of inversion. The opposition of reality and individual traditional for the natural school is turned into a mirror-image of collective and individual, which are reversed. The negative chernukha drive becomes a manifestation not of the outer reality of social circumstances but of the internalized version of chernukha consciousness. The negative excess here manifests itself through totality of the chernukha consciousness, which is emphasized by the sole point of view that is the internal perspective of the narrator.

The chernukha of Liudmila Petrushevskaia could be described as grotesque chernukha. It is more detached from the naturalist traditions and is similar to Makanin's work in terms of introducing subjectified narration. However, what was a mere inversion and mirror image in Makanin's text becomes, in Petrushevskaia's novella, a radical subversion of narrative instances, which creates a communicational breakdown even on the level of readership. Petrushevskaia's use of chernukha's negative excess is represented by her attention to abjection, which she juxtaposes with everyday routine, introducing casual narration of horrific events and suggesting that the daily [*byt*] and the abject are interchangeable, if not the same. Different types of chernukha in literature represent the development of the phenomenon rather than it's breaking down into separate trends. That continuity is attested to by their common roots (naturalism) and the common vision the texts imply (that of negative excess).

In the second chapter I illustrate the development of the features of negative excessive vision and representational failure as attested by three films. All three films demonstrate the same patterns of employing chernukha. Firstly, there is an emphasis on non-verbal ways of conveying the message, which is specifically demonstrated by the excessive physicality present on the screen. Examples of this are: the "overcrowded" frame in *Little Vera* and the intense "tangible" physicality of the dead body in *The Second Circle*. The other formal feature that creates a nauseating atmosphere in chernukha productions is the dominant descriptive mode, which signifies the presence of chernukha style even if the ideological intentions or genre implications of the film suggest differently. Such are *Taxi Blues* and *The Second Circle*, in which the descriptive mode of chernukha aesthetics permeate and dominate the ideological subtext of the film (the class antagonism in *Taxi Blues* and the existential drama in *The Second Circle*).

There is a tendency in more recent films to move further away from the "authentic" chernukha of the perestroika period like *Little Vera*, with its realistic, straight-forward narration, social determinism and denunciatory pathos, as well as naturalistic tendencies of "typage." *Taxi Blues* and *The Second Circle*, being more sophisticated productions and further removed from the mode of naturalism, use the descriptive mode more heavily, emphasizing chernukha aesthetics over the plot development (thus, in *The Second Circle* the whole film is one continuous description). The other strategy that the films use to intensify the chernukha mode of negative excess is the strategy of repetition, when the structure of the film is circular in the sense of recurring images and repetitive patterns that signify the intensification of chernukha discourse and a degradation of the course of events. All films also present a conflicting situation that results in broken communication and failed representational structures. The subversion of representational constructs ranges from subversion of Soviet ideology in

Little Vera and to the undermining of the status of the viewer in the cinema in *The Second Circle*.

Thus, chernukha in film represents the development of the chernukha style in diverse productions (that of mass appeal, *Little Vera*; intellectual film, *The Second Circle*; and borderline genre production, *Taxi Blues*). Those productions bear conceptual unity: that of negative excess, manifested through narrative strategies of description and repetition. The negative excess of chernukha art implies subversion of culturally inscribed norms and the failure of representational constructs as well as other forms of communicational breakdown on the level of story and discourse.

Finally, in the third chapter I regard the development of the chernukha art mode within postmodern aesthetics. I examine a story by conceptualist writer Vladimir Sorokin (*Next Item on the Agenda*) and the contemporary Russian film *Brother* (directed by Alexei Balabanov). I argue that both works belong to postmodern aesthetics. One of the reasons for such a classification is the fact that both works present a subversion of metanarrative (the literary discourse in Sorokin's case and genre conventions in Balabanov's case). Both authors employ chernukha aesthetics and present negative excess as the means of "ultimate transgression" (Bataille), that is, transgression that does not serve as a double gesture of inscribing the taboo by the very fact of its violation. Sorokin uses a new mode of chernukha that is self-reflective, which is employed with critical distance of a literary artifice. Chernukha's excessive violent vision is turned into a conceptual device for Sorokin in order to destroy cultural discourse, leaving a void of failed language and dismantled conventions. Balabanov uses chernukha's negative drive to perform a transgression beyond the marginality inscribed by social and cultural constructs. *Brother's* protagonist represents the so-called heterogeneous subject, which subscribes to no social status or fixed identity and represents a "leap" into the domain of transgressed subjectivity beyond cultural inscriptions.

After the chapters and the bibliography section I provide an appendix that contains information and a brief summary of the films analyzed in the present work.

Therefore, through an analysis of diverse perestroika era productions and contemporary Russian texts I intend to demonstrate that the chernukha phenomenon bears a transgressive and flexible nature. It adapts to different cultural statuses of diverse artistic works and transgresses time periods and the conventions of trends. Furthermore, all chernukha texts possess distinctive common features and a conceptual unity. That conceptual unity is of negative excess and extreme violent and "abjectified" vision, which manifests itself not only on the level of thematic presence but also on the level of narrative form and style, giving the chernukha art mode its distinctive voice and message. That message, I believe, is an attempt to approach and appropriate the horrific, the disgusting, the abnormal.

The importance of analyzing and defining chernukha lies in the examination of one of the most complex and persistent art forms in contemporary Russian culture that articulates the abject, the obscure, and the marginal.

So far chernukha as a way of dealing with the social unconscious, the marginal excessive phenomena was largely neglected by scholarship despite its permanent presence within Russian colloquial speech, Russian journalistic and political debate and Russian art. I hope that my research will amend the situation by clarifying the nature and functions of one of the most interesting and prolific art trends in contemporary Russian culture.

Chapter I. Chernukha in the Post-Soviet Fiction

The notion of chernukha in literature originates in film criticism. With the rise of chernukha film a term was found in perestroika literature to adequately describe the new tendencies. However, unlike film chernukha, which has been discussed and analyzed in Russia and in the West,[2] the criticism on chernukha literature seems to be quite scarce. The majority of Russian criticism is mostly concerned with the individual style of a particular author, whose works might or might not be attributed to the chernukha as an art mode, while the criticism analyzing chernukha as a trend and an independent phenomenon is virtually non-existent. Western criticism rarely acknowledges the concept of chernukha literature, which is replaced by more appropriate "literary" names circulating within Russian critical circles. One such example is the term "tough and cruel prose," [*zhestkaia proza* and *zhestokaia proza*] as formulated in Deming Brown's *The Last Years of Soviet Russian Literature* (1993). A similar approach is adopted by N. N. Shneidman, whose classification also seems to be confusing in terms of distinguishing between different types of "tough" and "dark" literature of perestroika.[3] Clearly, the diversity of perestroika and the post-Soviet literary scene causes some confusion in terminology.

Helena Goscilo in her "Introduction" to a volume of Glasnost prose points out that the variation in the directions that Russian literature took after the collapse of the dominant mode of expression – Socialist Realism – can mainly be explained by the historic affiliation of the authors. There are three such categories. Firstly, there are the writers who were well-established within Soviet literature but who produced more daring texts, oriented towards denouncing the social problems associated with the Soviet regime and essentially keeping within the realistic mode with journalistic overtones [*publitsistika*] (such as the representatives of "village prose"[4] Viktor Astafiev and Valentin Rasputin or writers like Vladimir Makanin). Secondly, there are the dissident writers, who were either banned or available only in unofficial hand-made (*samizdat*) publications (Liudmila Petrushevskaia, Varlaam Shalamov, Alexander Solzhenitsyn). Finally, there is the group of authors that started out in the 1970s in the underground movement and became associated with advances of postmodernism, conceptual writing and other experimental fiction (Vladimir Sorokin, Viktor Erofeev). I will demonstrate how chernukha as an art mode can be adopted by the representatives of all three "groups."

Thus, there is a clear lack of critical texts that deal specifically with the chernukha phenomenon and that might define chernukha as a trend and literary tendency, as a unified phenomenon. The exception seems to be the critics who discuss the chernukha art mode within the traditions of naturalism, as a literary exploration of social evils, misery and the inhuman condition of contemporary Russian society (Lipovetsky, Kustanovich). Still, chernukha as a term seems to be a free-floating notion, allegedly "everybody knows what it is." This is precisely why it is lacking in definition (Umberto Eco noted the same about kitsch in *The Open Work*). Meanwhile, chernukha as a term has unusually broad implications. I have noted that chernukha is: (1) the colloquial expression referring to obscene material or hard-core pornography, criminal or violent events; (2) unethical journalism and PR; (3) the trend in Post-Soviet cinema that displays the gloomiest and most hopeless sides of social life; and, (4) a literary tradition that address issues similar to those treated by chernukha film.

The semantic unity and diverse application of the notion of chernukha suggests that the artistic phenomenon, namely chernukha literature, exists in a broader context than neonaturalism, specifically described by film critics as lacking artistic innovation and stylistic complexity (Horton and Brashinsky) and by literary criticism as a content-oriented sensational exposé of social injustice (Lipovetsky). My objective is to develop a unified concept of chernukha in literature, including its naturalist roots (specifically within the Russian tradition of the 19th century), its potential in the breaking of taboos and the evocation of a feeling of shock and socially oriented thematics. However, I will not limit myself to those topics. I intend to demonstrate the transcendence of chernukha aesthetics beyond neonaturalist tendencies and its diverse presence in different works of contemporary and perestroika writers. I will also attempt to provide a theoretical explanation for chernukha's presence in those contexts by describing a common conceptual background for different authors. That conceptual background includes the notions of negative excess, representational failure, taboo and transgression, as described by Georges Bataille and presented in the introduction to the present work.

I will also move from a content-oriented analysis towards a formal analysis, paying as much attention to the way in which chernukha stories are told as to what they are about. For this purpose I will utilize the theoretical legacy of the Russian formal school, namely the concepts of defamiliarization and recognition (Viktor Shklovsky) as well as the division between "fabula" and "siuzhet" (Boris Tomashevsky) – the "what" and the "how" of the text; I will also utilize narratology in my analysis of narrative instances and structure (Michael Riffaterre, Norman Friedman). The productivity of the formal analysis lies in the diversity of the texts analyzed, which are brought together not only by the thematic similarities, but also (and, in fact, primarily) by the same techniques, stylistic features and transgressive elements that allow those texts to be labeled chernukha art. I chose texts which were mentioned in chernukha criticism as partially or totally attributable to the chernukha phenomenon (specifically according to Mark Lipovetsky). However, the criticism has not produced any definitive classification of the trend or exploration of the common features of the works. One of the criteria for my choice was their stylistic, textual and qualitative diversity.

I will start my analysis with Viktor Astafiev's novella *Liudochka* (1989). Astafiev is a representative of village prose, whose novella fits almost perfectly within the framework of naturalist aesthetics, with realistic narration and a humanist pathos of accusation towards injustice. Astafiev was one of the writers who enjoyed mass popularity with his denunciatory prose during the rise of perestroika. His works are perfectly fit for mass consumption in the perestroika period, with their shocking plots and realist narration. The next work I will look at is a novel by Vladimir Makanin: *Underground or the Hero of Our Time* (1998), which combines the traditions of mass-literature and the intellectual novel (Lipovetsky's definition). This is a more complex text from the point of view of narrative strategies and the presentation of chernukha topics. At the same time, it is already removed from the naturalist tradition. I will conclude this chapter with an analysis of the novella *Our Crowd* (written 1979; published 1989) by Liudmila Petrushevskaia, an author whose language and narrative strategies are often classified as complex and whose writing style is regarded as elite and high-brow.[5] The presence of the chernukha art mode within texts that vary by style, language and literary status will add weight to the argument that chernukha art is essentially a transgressive art mode, which transforms and adapts to different trends and transcends the temporal limits of the perestroika era (as I will demonstrate in Chapter III). To exemplify the transgressive nature of chernukha I will show how chernukha art goes beyond the naturalist legacy as well as how it actualizes its negative excessive vision in diverse literary texts.

The close connection of chernukha with naturalist aesthetics has been noted by a few critics. The most influential critic who explicitly associates chernukha with neonaturalism is Mark Lipovetsky. His "Rastratnye Strategii ili Metamorfozy Chernukhi" [The Strategies of Waste and the Metamorphosis of Chernukha] was published in a literary journal *Novyi Mir* in 1999. Lipovetsky defines chernukha thematically in terms of its mainly socially oriented topics:

> …в постсоветское, в первые годы "гласности", этот ярлык [чернухи]был наклеен на широкий фронт неонатуралистической прозы, раскрывшей читателю глаза на существование бомжей, проституток, лимиты, армейской дедовщины, тюремных ужасов и многих других социальных явлений (Интернет ресурс: http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/1999/11/ lipowez-pr.html).
>
> In post-Soviet times, in the first years of "glasnost,' this label [chernukha] was applied to a wide range of neo-naturalist prose, which opened the reader's eyes to the existence of the homeless, prostitutes, transient workers, brutal hazing in the army, horrors in the prisons and many other social manifestations (Online resource URL: http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/1999/11/ lipowez-pr.html).[6]

The main function of chernukha literature, according to Lipovetsky, is to vocalize the discourse that was muted by official ideology. Lipovetsky emphasizes two aspects of chernukha: its origin within taboo zones and the fact that it is a discourse oriented at social pathology, intended to depict social reality in its ugly forms "as it really is."

> …читатель в общем-то знал о существовании явлений этого ряда, так как постоянно сталкивался с ними в своей социальной практике, но знание это было, так сказать, нелегитимным. "Чернуха" придавала ему легитимность

> уже самим фактом публикации... "Чернуха"...нужна была для того, чтобы ввести известные социальные феномены в культурный контекст (Интернет ресурс: http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/1999/11/ lipowez-pr.html).

> ...the reader generally knew about the existence of such manifestations, as s/he constantly encountered them in his/her daily life, but this knowledge was, so to say, illegitimate. "Chernukha" gave this knowledge legitimacy by the very fact of it publication... "Chernukha"...was necessary in order to bring well-known social phenomena into the cultural context (Online resource URL: http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/1999/11/ lipowez-pr.html).

Lipovetsky traces the origins of chernukha to the "natural school" of the 19th century and the traditions of the "physiological sketch." Lipovetsky's views are shared by Konstantin Kustanovich who, in his article *Naturalistic Tendencies in Contemporary Soviet Fiction* (1992), also links the works of such authors as Sergey Kaledin, Evgeny Popov, and Liudmila Petrushevskaia to naturalism, relying primarily on the writings of the French naturalists, namely Emile Zola. Thus, the critical classification of chernukha literature lies mainly within the framework of neonaturalism, referring specifically to the perestroika writers that indulged themselves in the former taboo zones of Soviet ideological discourse. This way chernukha art is confined to the boundaries of the perestroika era as well as framed within the Russian literary tradition, namely, the tradition of the natural school of the 19th century.

The natural school of the 1840s was headed by Vissarion Belinsky and proclaimed that it was continuing the traditions of Nikolai Gogol. It united many Russian writers, who absorbed the ideology of Belinsky to different extents (Ivan Turgenev, Ivan Goncharov, early Fedor Dostoevsky, Dmitry Grigorovich, Nikolai Nekrasov and others). The highest manifestation of Russian naturalism became the collection *Fiziologiia Peterburga* [Physiology of Saint Petersburg] (1845), which concentrated on social types:

street-sweepers, organ-grinders, workers following the tradition of French literary "physiologies," a fashion started by Balzac's *The Human Comedy*. The presentation of "typage," an individual whose existence is determined by social and class stratification, is the focus of any physiology, including those of the Russian natural school, in which physiologies also acquired the pathos of condemnation of social injustice.

Thus, in Russian naturalism great attention was paid to the representatives of the lower classes (in the tradition of Gogol's portrayal of petty functionaries [*chinovniki*]), all sorts of "insulted and injured" little people. The problem of the "little man" [*malenkyi chelovek*] was crucial for the natural school: the focus was on the ordinary person from the masses. The natural school was also an ideological trend: depicting unpleasant social facts and types, it stood for the Westernizers' ideological ideas of the modernization and democratization of Russian society (with a Socialist emphasis).

Both interests in social stratification and individual misery as an outcome of social environment have a conceptual motivation within the natural school tradition. That motivation is described by prominent Russian literary critic Yuri Mann as the relationship between an individual and his or her environment. The "environment" or "reality" [*deistvitelnost*] in Mann's understanding is not just the social milieu, a combination of external factors that determine individual destiny, but rather a "spirit of time…centennial step forward" [дух времени…поступь века] (254). That critical approach provides a more sophisticated understanding of the perception of the social reality within the naturalist tradition. Reality becomes an important factor that shapes individual psychology, usually through destruction and/or conformism of the individual character and desires. Thus, Mann points out two core characteristics of natural school poetics developed as an outcome of the dominion of reality in the ideology of the natural school. Firstly, the collision of conflicting personalities and worldviews (for example, romantic and pragmatic) that results in the unification of all illusory hopes and ideals by the social reality and conformity to common morality. Secondly, evil and suffering are caused not by individual conduct but rather by socially determined circumstances – the inertia of "the way things are."

Besides the conceptual basis of natural school aesthetics, Mann also points out some of the structural and technical devices that naturalists favoured, specifically: attention to detail and daily life [*byt*] which represents reality in all of its manipulative totality, not just social determinism (an individual becomes a "function" of reality); the physiology of social environment as the means to represent a particular, "scientific" slice of that reality; and a strong authorial guiding presence, justified through the narration of observation (the narrator witnessed the event or was a participant, usually passive). The guiding authorial figure supported the concept of objective narration, truthful to life and to the reality that constituted as well as brutally altered the lives of individual people.

The aspect of the "objectivity" of the natural school is quite important, the necessity of "literariness" (i.e. the imaginative quality of literature) was highly debatable among the followers of the natural school, whose writings (particularly the "physiological sketch") were geared towards journalism and a documentary-like depiction of "real life." That point, as well as the socialist agenda, correlated with the promotion of mass literature targeted at a broader audience. Belinsky, in his introduction to *The Physiology of Petersburg*, wrote:

> Русская литература представляет едва ли не более материалов для изучения исторического и нравственного быта чужих стран, нежели России. Мы разумеем здесь произведения беллетристические, то, что составляет так называемую *легкую литературу*, которой назначение состоит в том, чтоб занимать досуги большинства читающей публики и удовлетворять его потребности (32).
>
> Russian literature almost contains more material for the study of the historical and moral existence of foreign countries than of Russia. By this we understand works of *belles-lettres*, that which makes up so-called *light reading*, the meaning of which lies in taking up the free time of the majority of the reading public and satisfying the needs of that public.

Thus, Belinsky proclaims the natural school's two intentions: literature has to appeal to the masses as much as it needs to educate them with regards to their country, its inhabitants and their morals. The task happened to be quite utopian, as the general public genuinely hated naturalism with its thorough depictions of alcoholism (in *Peterburgskie Ugly* [Petersburg Corners] by Nekrasov), dirty basements and the marginal classes leading a life that was unbearable from the "civilized" perspective (*Peterburgskie Sharmanshchiki* [Petersburg Organ-Grinders] by Grigorovich). The intention to educate and ameliorate the public happened to be the cornerstone of the consecutive development of Russian *belle lettres* up to the time of chernukha.

Consequently, contemporary chernukha inherits a lot from the naturalism of the 19th century. Detailed attention is focused upon daily life and the surrounding environment, emphasizing the pathological sides of existence, which are represented by unbearable living conditions. There are many such examples in literature, as I will demonstrate, as well as in chernukha films, which are mostly concerned with wretched living conditions (communal apartments and conflict-riddled cohabitation, as in *Little Vera* and *Taxi Blues*). Chernukha of the perestroika period also kept up with the tradition of the physiological sketch, concentrating on "little people" pushed to the margins of social existence (prostitutes, alcoholics, criminals and beggars are the usual characters in chernukha art); they are deprived of their rights and forced by social conditions into an unbearable existence. Both the natural school and chernukha has a special passion for a documentary, laconic, "objective" style. Journalistic prose [публицистика] had a strong influence upon chernukha literature, usually promoting sensationalism over quality, as noted by Helena Goscilo in the "Introduction" mentioned earlier (it is worth remembering that one of the colloquial definitions of chernukha is *cheap*). As Lipovetsky points out, chernukha, especially when blended with denunciatory prose, latched onto the miseries and evils of post-Soviet society, performing a didactic function as a kind of "eye-opener" for the Soviet citizens deprived of information about the unhealthy side of Soviet life. That explains why chernukha art of the time of perestroika (and even now, remembering the debates over chernukha journalism) caused public outrage, even including public protests against films like *Little Vera*. Therefore, naturalist elements constitute the constant thematics of chernukha art. However, my objective is to demonstrate how the chernukha art mode evolves from the legacy of the natural school, transgressing the boundaries of perestroika literature and the perestroika time period.

Criticism notes that there is also a crucial difference between the contemporary neo-naturalist trend and its 19th century counterpart.[7] The point of discrepancy is that chernukha art, in contradiction to "natural school" writings, does not represent any ideological consciousness, but rather indulges itself in the gloomy evils of life. Mark Lipovetsky interprets chernukha literature as an outcome of the destruction of ideological consciousness, therefore, as not standing for any ideology. Konstantin Kustanovich, without specifying his analysis as a study of chernukha, states the same:

> …the idea that although such negative aspects of human experience as, for instance, cruelty, injustice, physical suffering and immorality are encountered in life, they're nonetheless exception and can be dealt with in one way or another. Contrary to this idea, each of the writers [Kaledin, Popov, Petrushevskaia] discussed here depicts a reality in which such aspects are dominant and irremediable (87).

It is true that chernukha does not know "metaphysical evil" (which is probably more suitable for the modernist era), that is to say, the romantic concept of evil having a mystical nature of omnipotence and ubiquitous destruction. The style of chernukha writing is highly casual; it presents evil as a norm rather than an abnormality, which creates an effect of shock. Characterizing Petrushevskaia, for example, Kustanovich states that she "creates a horrible world the main horror of which is that its inhabitants perceive it as normal" (87). However, the denunciatory pathos of many works of chernukha of the perestroika period, such as those by Astafiev (*Liudochka* or *Ubity i Prokliaty* [Murdered and Cursed]) or films such as *Taxi Blues*, without subscribing to any ideology in particular, still present an opinionated authorial voice (*Liudochka*) or manipulation using common stereotypical images (*Taxi Blues*). Chernukha's roots in 19th century naturalism could obviously provide links, not only to the works of naturalist writers but also to those of Fedor Dostoevsky in his later writings as well. It is true that Dostoevsky's style also presents the reader with many shocking details and disgusting or horrific elements. A fine example of that is a murder scene from *Prestuplenie i Nakazanie* [Crime and Punishment] (1866) or that of the horse being beaten to death in *Idiot* [The Idiot] (1868). However, the point of discrepancy with Dostoevsky, just like with the natural school, comes with the ideological weight of the literary work, the affirmative representational construct behind the literary text, the affirmation of the positive by pointing to the negative. I will argue that an ideological stand is present in chernukha works, but it is not as powerful as chernukha aesthetics themselves, which create an excessive negative vision, undermining any ideology seen as a definite (if not a positive) representational construct. An ideological agenda of any kind might be present in chernukha works but it is unlikely to outweigh the negative drive towards destruction and subversion of any positive value expressed tacitly or overtly. That is one of the radical departures of contemporary chernukha from the writings of 19th century authors, who like Dostoevsky strove to improve the reader through their visions of the ideal.

The unclear ideological nature of chernukha art correlates with the confusion regarding the nature of the chernukha literature and the potential list of authors it encompasses. The question is: what defines chernukha as an art trend and therefore, what elements should be regarded as inherent and symptomatic to it and which are to be discarded as not significant? Obviously, the core aspects of naturalist discourse constitute the foundation for chernukha thematics: "typage;" daily existence; focus on social ills and marginal elements; the individual as a function of and determined by "reality;" the depiction of unpleasant (usually obscene or horrific) details. Those themes, although they could be found within a wide range of authors are treated by them in a completely different manner. For example, the rape theme could be found in the works of realist village-prose representative Viktor Astafiev; sophisticated, not confined to any classification, such as the stories of Petrushevskaia; and the conceptual postmodern writings of Vladimir Sorokin. I intend to establish criteria for a classification that is more solid than just general attention to violence, "grime and slime" and I hope that it will define the influence of chernukha art on Russian contemporary fiction and the extent to which that influence stretches.

In order to work towards a "definition of the chernukha genre" I propose, firstly, to analyze "traditional" chernukha literary works, which completely fit the definitions of neo-naturalist prose and are historically determined by the rise of perestroika (Viktor Astafiev's *Liudochka*). Secondly, I would like to explore the works of the writers that are not traditionally considered as working within chernukha, or whose status in the chernukha mode is subject to debate. Vladimir Makanin's novel *Underground or the Hero of Our Time* and Liudmila Petrushevskaia's novella *Our Crowd* could exemplify the evolution of chernukha from neo-naturalism as well as the diversity within chernukha art mode itself. My intention is to illustrate how chernukha manifests itself within the structure of form and content as well as to demonstrate its transformation and the level of the appropriation of chernukha. Thus, as a result, I hope to establish few paradigms of chernukha in literature that transcend the traditional definitions of the phenomenon and show the potential that it possesses.

1. Paint It Black: Chernukha and the Rise of Perestroika.

Following the filmmakers, the writers of perestroika were exploring the forbidden topics of sex, violence, decaying morals and marginalized social elements. I chose Viktor Astafiev's *Liudochka (*1989) as the most representative text of chernukha of the perestroika period, basing my judgment upon the novella's content and form.

Astafiev's *Liudochka* is the story of a village girl of mediocre abilities who comes to a small town [*poselok gorodskogo tipa*] for a better life and an education, but who gets none of those. She manages to become a cleaning-woman at the local hair stylist and finds accommodation with an old female colleague. One day Liudochka is raped by a local teenage gang leader, and then she goes home to her native village but finds no rest there either, so she returns to the town and commits suicide. Her step-father, who appears to be a former criminal, goes and kills the gang leader by drowning him in an industrial pool of boiling water.

The plot is already quite gloomy, but the way the narrator presents it makes it even worse. The story is full of details about the life of the town and its inhabitants, who appear to be individuals with no morals and no compassion for each other, not mentioning any purpose in life or concern for their environment. A representative of "village prose," Astafiev shows in full the corrupt nature of people removed from their roots, with no respect for the past and no hope for the future. In accordance with the traditions of the natural school, narrator presents an omniscient narrative that guides the reader's perception ("editorial omniscience" in Norman Friedman's terms). The "editorial omniscience" is characterized by the opinionated remarks made by the implied author, who tells the story from the all-knowing position. That narrative strategy is set from the start as the narrative mode of the text. In the beginning, the narrator introduces the story to the reader as typical for the current times but, at the same time, tragically unique for its horror and brutality; he refers to a famous verse by Pushkin as the source of "higher" values and establishes the mood of the story as one of condemnation and pity.

The judgmental position of the narrator is also evident in the opinionated remarks throughout the novella. Thus, the description of the local discotheque indicates the pathos of condemnation as well as an opinionated stand that the narrator takes on the morals and the means of merry-making in the small town. The discotheque becomes a topos in chernukha of the perestroika period that absorbs and reflects the destructive changes that society undergoes. In *Liudochka* it is the deprivation of roots and traditional culture, in *Little Vera,* as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, it will be the destructive generation gap between Vera's lifestyle and that of her parents:

> Бесилось, неистовствало стадо, творя из танцев телесный срам и бред. Взмокшие, горячие от разнузданности, от распоясавшейся плоти, издевающиеся надо всем, что было человеческого вокруг них, что было до них, что будет после них, в проволоке, за решеткой, мотали друг друга, висли один на другом, душили себя и партнера... (All citations of *Liudochka* are from Erofeev, Viktor. ed. *Russkie Tsvety Zla* [Russian Fleurs du Mal] collection, 75)
>
> The herd raged and raved, turning their dancing into a shameful demonic display of flesh and madness. People dripping wet, people boiling with unbridled lust and unleashed passions, people mocking everything that was human, everything that had come before them and everything that would come after, were exhausting themselves as they hung on to one another behind the wire, choking themselves and partners alike… (All citations of *Liudochka* are from Erofeyev, Viktor. ed. *The Penguin Book of New Russian Writing: Russia's Fleurs du Mal*, 33)

Village prose was always highly influenced by Slavophile ideas. Astafiev's chernukha in the tradition of the 19th century naturalists is ideologically oriented: it reveals the problems of contemporary urban provincial towns with the accusatory pathos of a follower of the traditional ways. It is "allusion to the negative as the way to point to the ideal" (Belinsky about Gogol).

Astafiev's novella has many attributes of naturalist aesthetics. For example the usage of naturalist language, depicting in detail what floats in the polluted local river (such as liquor bottles, garbage, industrial waste and goat fur – an ironic reference to the people's forgotten village roots), descriptions of poor accommodations and impoverished local settings. The naturalist take on the poor reality that dominates the characters is shown by the absence of positive characters in the story. The local teenage gang members are the worst of all, but Liudochka's hostess is also not good – she is portrayed as a selfish old woman, who kicks Liudochka out after the rape because she is afraid of the gang leader. Liudochka's mother is a troubled person who is dominated by her husband, while Liudochka's step-father is simply dangerous, though he eventually commits the act of "justice." Liudochka herself is pitiful but not admirable. She is also weak and as troubled as her mother; due to her father's alcoholism she might have some mental disorder that makes her slow and slow-witted. The reader, nonetheless, sympathizes with Liudochka because she is a victim of the times and society, a member of the lost generation that is doomed to moral downfall when all ideals are shattered (*Little Vera's* heroine is another example of the troubled youth). Obviously, Astafiev does not strive to describe any particular character, but rather to provide a typical situation and the types inspired by that situation, subscribing to the naturalist tradition of typological description.

Generally, Astafiev's story has all necessary chernukha attributes: it portrays an impoverished provincial town with an abbreviated name – Carsteng (Carriages and Steam Engines) [VPRZ] – which adds to its backwardness. The abbreviation indicates the Soviet way of life, that the small town is not a "home" for its people but a mere function within the system (that is, after all, what the abbreviation usually stood for – it was an indication of the place, organization etc.). The novella in general presents a mocking vision of the Soviet past, such as a description of the fading slogans that lie scattered around the town's central park. Other chernukha elements are: the description of the terrifying urban environment (terror in the sense of pollution and poverty) and dying villages; troubled criminal youth (a prominent theme especially in film, see Chapter II) and adults who care only about their pragmatic interests.

Thus, Astafiev's text exemplifies chernukha as a neonaturalist trend that inherits a lot from the "natural school" of the 19th century: the "physiological sketch" of the social types; attention to details that characterize the environment and consequently determine human behaviour; concentration on gloomy features of contemporary society and their identification with the illness of the decaying morals. The story presents a clear ideological perspective through the narrative/authorial voice that introduces the reader into the story and guides her/him, pointing out the evil and unhealthy sides of the reality in which Liudochka has to live; it also concentrates on the small, ordinary human being crushed by the system. The chernukha of the content is represented by the traditional chernukha thematics of desperation and the downfall of humanitarian values: gloom and doom.

There is obviously a conscious intention to shock the public in a manner characteristic of perestroika literature: appealing to the documentary-like objectivity, the narration in fact presents the shocking, scandalous aspects of the daily life, revealing the taboos of Soviet ideology. Astafiev's novella is a typical case for many other stories with similar intentions and thematic dependence on naturalist traditions, such as the famous novellas by Sergey Kaledin (*Smirennoe Kladbishche* [The Humble Cemetery]), Daniil Granin (*Bizon* [The Bison]) and many others.

The strategy of the detailed description and the visualization of the most unbearable sides of life constitutes an especially interesting feature of chernukha of the perestroika period. The style is characterized by descriptions with many adjectives of strong emotional appeal, which intensify the description, for example, of the dancing youth in the discotheque passage: “Со всех сторон потешался и ржал *клокочущий, воющий, пылящий, перегарную вонь изрыгающий* загон” (75) / “On all sides the enclosed mob roared in mocking laughter. It howled, seethed, bubbled, and belched forth the stench of alcohol” (33) [the italics are mine]. The other important feature is the use of colloquial speech and jargon, the degradation of literary speech in order to create a more realistic impression – this technique was also widely used in the physiological sketch.

In the traditions of the natural school’s societal critique Astafiev also juxtaposes opinionated narration with a casual style of reportage trivializing the horrible to point that it becomes a social symptom of declining morals. Targeted at the presentation of “life as it is” in a casual and report-like fashion with no ironic touch (and sometimes with the pathos of condemnation), chernukha of the perestroika period creates a shocking effect and claims to raise the reader’s awareness of the horrors s/he lives in. However, it serves more than just the purpose of legitimizing the discourse of “grime and slime” in the early Post-Soviet context. Chernukha in Astafiev’s text constitutes such an overwhelming abundance of disgusting details, such an intense “vomiting discourse” that the very excessiveness of these elements suggests the artifice, the literary technique. The “true-to-life” purpose is paradoxically diminished by the excessive excavation of disgust. The formal effect of chernukha becomes the experience of the negative sensation *per se* (and this is the point where ideological stands do not matter, although, that does not mean they are absent).

Therefore, chernukha on the level of formal textual aspects is characterized, first of all, by detailed descriptions that bear more significance than the characters or plot development,[8] which is also common for naturalism, since what matters is the environment that produces the type rather than the actions that type undertakes to master the environment. For descriptions the narrator uses mainly adjectives with strong emotional connotations that come in a persistent repetitive manner. For example, the description of Liudochka's father after he murders the gang leader, I have italicized the repetitive adjectives that semantically mean the same thing:

> — У-у-уы-ы-ых! У-у-уы-ы-ых! — доносилось из утробы, из-под *набрякших неандертальских* бугров лба, из-под *сдавленных* бровей, а из глаз все сверкали и не гасли, сверкали и не гасли те искры, тот пламень, что расплавил и сделал глаза пустыми, ничего и никого не видящими (italics are mine, 112).

> A low, terrifying growl came from deep inside his belly, from under the *swollen Neanderthal mounds* of his forehead, from under the *crushed eyebrows*, while from his eyes there kept on flashing and flashing the undying sparks and the undying flame that had made those same eyes molten and empty, made them eyes that saw nothing and no one (italics are mine, 72).

In addition to the repetitive descriptions, the story is structured (on the level of the *siuzhet*) with an increasing level of textual violence, which is aimed at the destruction of conventional reading pleasure, becoming instead a marginalized reading experience encountering the horrific, the disgusting, and mainly physical detail. Thus, the scene of Liudochka's suicide is centered on the *post factum* reality of the corpse Liudochka becomes. The depiction of her violent death starts with the terminal reality of her dead body:

> Людочка никогда не интересовалась удавленниками и не знала, что у них некрасиво выпяливается язык, непременно происходит мочеиспускание. Она успела лишь почувствовать, как стало горячо и больно в ее недре.., попробовала схватиться за петлю, чтоб освободиться, цапнула по веровочке судорожными пальцами, но только поцарапала шею (106).

> Liudochka had never taken any interest in what happens to people who hang themselves and didn't know that their tongues stick out horribly and that they invariably urinate. She had just about enough time to feel how everything had become painful and hot deep inside her, she…tried to grab hold of the noose in order to free herself, snatched at the cord with frenzied fingers, but only succeeded in scratching her neck… (66)

Thus, the strategy of inverse description, focusing on the state of death, emphasizes the negative vision of the story, presenting the tragic death of the protagonist by describing the physical ugliness of the corpse, while she is, in fact, still alive.

The emphasized physicality is a prominent sign of chernukha and repeatedly appears in various works, including those analyzed here. The naturalist background favours that type of description as true-to-life but never exceeds the conventions of cultural decency. However, in post-Soviet literature the marginalized descriptions associated mainly with bodily functions outdo any naturalist works. Chernukha in the colloquial usage indicates obscenity specifically related to the bodily functions, scatological, sexual etc., that transgresses the norm. By the same token chernukha literature creates its negative vision through attention to the obscene details violating the norms of the literary space as a "clean" cultural space.

This obscenity, however, is different from experimental fiction, as it focuses on shocking detail with no justification, or with a justification that is not valid within the context of the overwhelming negative textual description. If in avant-garde experiments obscene detail either stands for allegory or a concept (for example, Rene Magritte's painting *Rape* stands for the inverted vision of woman) or epatage (for example the obscenity of Marcel Duchamp's installations), which means it is still culturally inscribed, i.e. acceptable. In chernukha the obscenity bears the mark of the empty signified: it stands for nothing but itself. Even in Astafiev's quite unsophisticated prose, the horrific obscene details of Liudochka's death do not appear as the means to visualize tragedy and provide a moral lesson for the reader, though, they might strive to do so on the ideological level. What is present instead is an overwhelming drive, an excessive presence of textual strategies violating the literary conventions of meaning, as the only meaning to the negative excess is this excess itself, driven by the power of disgust.

The effect of such intensive violation of cultural reading conventions of decency is marginalized pleasure. Roland Barthes, in his influential *Pleasure of the Text* (1975) distinguishes between two types of reading pleasures, "text of pleasure" and "text of bliss." The "text of pleasure" is based on the conventional expectations of literary text, even if it is an avant-garde work and such pleasures are not suitable for all audiences. The "text of bliss" presents a marginal experience of "deep laceration" inflicted upon "language itself, and not upon the simple temporality of its reading." In short, to read a "text of bliss" is a much more daring enterprise, because it destroys the very field of reading as a conventional practice of interpretational effort. It presents the transgression through the edge of existence of literature and so it is no wonder that Barthes mentions Bataille and de Sade as the authors of "text of bliss." Astafiev's text, being a quite simple and conventional didactic story, still bears that duplicity of reading pleasure. The answer to the paradox of naturalist intentions and marginal textual strategies within the same text lies within the nature of chernukha art.

In Astafiev's novella traces of natural school aesthetics are distinctly present and are implanted into the context of the perestroika era: on the level of content it is primarily an exploration of the relationship between the individual and reality, which is manifested as a conglomerate of social problems, the marginalization of social statuses and the pathos of the exposure of societal evils; the individual is a "typage" and is depicted as pitiful, marginalized and crippled by circumstances. On the formal level I have noted the strong presence of the "guiding" authorial voice, the objective narrator, who clearly stands outside the story, omniscient and judgmental. However, what Yuri Mann characterized as "attention to the details of daily life, the realistic style, the rapprochement of literary and popular speech" (245) in Astafiev's novella is intensified to the level of negative description used as a stylistic approach that focuses on obscene details and physiological bodily expressions. The process of intensification fostered the development of chernukha aesthetics, which involves transforming natural impulses into an excessive negative vision. As I have pointed out, the "abjectification" of style produces radical excess, similar to what Lipovetsky calls "strategies of waste" and which Bataille conceptualizes as unlimited expenditure. The negative excess of the obscene juxtaposes the dilemma of the taboo and its sacrificial violation. Chernukha in perestroika literature in general and in Astafiev's case in particular represents the sublimation of violence, encoding both taboo and the violation of that taboo into a work of art, defining the borders of the marginal and culturally inscribing the horrific.

Thus, in *Liudochka,* the shocking story of rape and suicide, despair and decay combines the rhetoric of accusation and familiarization with the style of marginality and excess, depicting the abject, inspiring the feeling of "vertigo and nausea" in the reader, producing a marginal reading pleasure. Though chernukha of the perestroika period still confirms the general ideological guidelines of the natural school, such as "civil justice" and the social strategies of defining the marginal, the negative excess and fascination with taboo subject matter (death, violence, obscenity) creates a realm of forbidden pleasure, as pointed out by Bataille. In this manner, apart from its socially inscribed intentions, chernukha prose grants the reader the marginalized pleasure of the text (see discussion on Barthes' theory above). Therefore, chernukha of the perestroika period includes a dual gesture: one of social inscription on the thematic level and another of cultural subversion on the level of style.

Vladimir Makanin's novel, in my view, represents an important landmark in the development of chernukha separated from the humanist traditions of the natural school into the eventual incorporation of chernukha into the subversive deconstructive practices of contemporary art. My objective will be to show how Vladimir's novel *Underground or the Hero of Our Time* (1998) continues the conceptual shift from the naturalist traditions of the 19th century.

2. Vladimir Makanin's Novel and the Transformation of Chernukha.

Makanin's novel is a first-person narration: the protagonist, Petrovich, tells us his story as a former dissident underground writer in the times of perestroika. Naturally for chernukha, the story is quite dark: Petrovich is homeless and has to earn his living by guarding other people's apartments in a former workers' dormitory which has been turned into an apartment building, where the rough traditions of dormitory life [*obshchazhnaia zhizn*] are still preserved: the fight for living space, illegal tenants [*limita*] and the criminal environment created by vagrants. Petrovich undergoes a series of dark adventures, committing two murders, becoming homeless and finally, managing to survive in a psychiatric ward, which in the traditions of Soviet mental health practice (used to suppress dissent) tries to crack Petrovich and compel him to confess his crimes. The instrument of this process is the same doctor who once made his brother, Venya, a gifted artist, mentally disabled using the same methods. Petrovich escapes the fate of his brother and returns by chance to the dormitory where his status is restored.

However, that conclusion does not give much hope for the future of the protagonist: Makanin ends his novel on a rather depressing note. Petrovich takes his brother out of the ward for a day to celebrate the publication of one of his sketches. Venya has a nervous break-down, and Petrovich gives him a pill that causes fatigue and an involuntary bowel movement. Both brothers crawl to the hospital under the feet of passers-by, with Venya leaving traces of the feces that fall out of his pants. The feces theme is prominent throughout the novel, being a metaphor for the broken spirit: the KGB officer that interrogates Venya promises him such a fate as the most painful humiliation and utmost level of suppression by the system. I have given a detailed account of the last part of the novel to describe the general "mood and tone" that Makanin's work sets. The accounts of murders, dormitory life and the psychiatric ward are no less harsh.

Mark Lipovetsky, in his article on chernukha, justifiably classifies Makanin's novel as chernukha in terms of its thematic focus on the chernukha topics traditional for perestroika, such as the KGB and medical violence in psychiatric wards; the dormitory life of the *limita* [individuals not registered in Moscow] deprived of rights and living in fear; the criminal underworld, etc. However, those traditional chernukha topics are not the primary distinguishing features of the novel, as Lipovetsky argues. Lipovetsky mentions two outstanding qualities of the novel that put it in a unique position in terms of the previous chernukha tradition: the combination of chernukha and the "intellectual novel" (high art) tradition within the same work and secondly, the totalizing effect of chernukha that the text explores. Lipovetsky writes that, unlike chernukha of the perestroika period, which had a naturalist tendency towards exposing the "festering wounds" of society, its injustice and filth, Makanin's novel presents chernukha as a totality of perception, which I would suggest be interpreted as an interior mode of existence rather than an exterior "reality" (Yuri Mann):

> Разоблачительная стратегия растратила свой потенциал не потому, что "язвы" исчезли, а потому, что "чернуха" стала режимом существования культуры.., горизонтом, который ее окружил со всех сторон (Интернет ресурс: http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/1999/11/lipowez-pr.html).
>
> The strategy of exposure lost its potential, not because the "festering wounds" disappeared, but because "chernukha" became the norm of cultural existence…, the horizon that surrounds it from all sides (Online resource URL: http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/1999/11/lipowez-pr.html).

I would like to explore those theses further in terms of defining the transformation of chernukha as well as its core characteristics in comparison to the traditions and the notion of negative excess of the natural school. The core characteristics that I would like to concentrate on are, firstly, the first-person narration and subjective presentation of the text and, secondly, the metatextual references contained within the novel.

The text is structured as a subjective narration and the reader learns everything from the perspective of the main character. However, this perspective is not an objectified vision, where the narrator tells the story without a clearly opinionated or noticeably altered vision of the events or other characters' thoughts and intentions. This type of first-person narration was common among realist and classicist literature, as well as many writers of the 19th century natural school ("I as witness" type of narration according to Friedman's classification). Nekrasov's *Petersburg Corners* is the typical example; the same device was used by Vladimir Dal and other representatives of the natural school. At the same time, Makanin's narrator and protagonist could not be considered to be an unreliable narrator, similar to the narrators of Liudmila Petrushevskaia, whose usage of the chernukha mode I will discuss shortly.

The unreliable narrator of Petrushevskaia, for example, provides a deliberately altered perspective, modified to suit the interests and perceptions of the character who serves as the narrator ("selective omniscience" according to Friedman). However, that type of narration is recognized by the reader as unreliable because the text itself gives clues pointing to the limitations and the incomplete nature of the narrator's point of view (see Helena Goscilo's argument about *Our Crowd's* unreliable narration in the next part of this chapter). The narration of Makanin's novel could be described as subjective narration that is all-inclusive, i.e. there are no other possibilities for the reader to construct reality within the text, but rather through the narration of protagonist ("I as protagonist" in Friedman's narratological scheme).

In the novel the subjective narration abides by two principles: the totality of the subjective vision and the non-linear structure of the narration. The narrative structure combines the unfolding of the "siuzhet" focalized through the protagonist's consciousness with the perceptive and often "literary" (as in the apple metaphor in the quotation below) commentary of Petrovich, the underground writer. The comments or reflections of the protagonist are an inherent part of the novel and formulate its syntax. As shown below, their importance is often reemphasized by visual separation in brackets, especially when they have to fit in with plot development, as in the following scene of Petrovich's second murder:

> Но я уже достаточно сблизился, прижался (оттолкнуть не успеет). И сразу, простым движением (за его лопаткой, как в знакомое место) я вогнал нож, ощутив острием провальную пустоту человеческого сердца. Он пискнул, как крыска в углу… Потом бился сколько-то, но уже беззвучно… Все произошло разом. (Как упавшее спелое яблоко.) Чувство сделанного дела, ничего больше. Тихо спустился по лестнице. Пустые ночные улицы (256-257).
>
> I had already drawn close enough and pressed into him (he won't be quick enough to push me away). Immediately, with one simple movement, having felt for the hollow space of the human heart with the blade of the knife. He squeaked, like a rat in the corner… Then he thrashed about for bit, but silently now… Everything happened at once. (Like a ripe apple that has fallen.) The feeling of finished business, nothing more. I quietly walked downstairs. Deserted night streets.

This way the "I-as-protagonist" narration presents solely the protagonists point of view, which transforms the storyline into a reflexive commentary, referring us to a literary discourse, which Petrovich rejects and nonetheless subjects himself to.[9] The specifically literary nature of Petrovich's narration (exemplified by the literary style, philosophical commentary and numerous references to the Russian literary tradition) brings up the issue of the omniscience and omnipotence of the narrator within the story. The story is constructed in the fashion of the literary text, the fact of which prevents any interference that could present a different perspective even indirectly: reality and fiction, literariness and factuality, narration and authorship are mixed deliberately by Makanin, creating a totalizing narrative that dominates and manipulates the reader's perception.

The subjective mode of the novel is reinforced by the non-linear structure of Makanin's work. Following the main story line (Petrovich's life in the dormitory, two murders, exile from the dormitory, psychiatric ward, escape and return to the previous position), the novel constantly deviates into different subplots, such as that of a love story, one of which is clearly a reminiscence, while the other one is presented with temporal ambiguity. Similarly, other digressive parts, illustrating different events in Petrovich's life and the people he meets during the stormy times of perestroika or the period of the stagnation under Brezhnev's rule usually do not follow any temporal logic, but follow instead the seemingly arbitrary swings of mood and memory of the protagonist.

Thus, the structure of the novel shifts from one event to another, which repeat and mirror each other. Besides the random return and overlapping of the plot subdivisions, the repetitive episodes or descriptive passages recur frequently, presenting smaller thematic patterns within the novel. These patterns include the repetitive description of drinking habits, dormitory life and especially the proud ego of the protagonist as described in the repetitive patterns of his obsession with the poor state of his shoes. The shoes become the manifestation of Petrovich's persona, caught between two realities: the high brow dissident underground and poverty and brutality of dormitory life. The shoes stand for the protagonist's high self-regard, his pride in being an "ageshnik" [underground member]:

> Я тоже потрепан времечком, но держусь. У меня нет живота. Жив и импульсивен. У меня - руки. У меня твердый шаг и хороший свитер; несколько чистых рубашек. (Если б еще ботинки!..) (205)
>
> Свитер был, свежая чистая рубашка, даже ботинки, сегодня сухо, казались приличными - а вот сумки нет, не было (462).
>
> I've also been shabby for a little while, but I'm hanging on. I don't have a belly. I'm alive and impulsive. I have hands. I have a firm step and a good sweater; several clean shirts. (If only I also had some boots!..)
>
> I had a sweater, a fresh, clean shirt, even boots; it's dry today, they turned out to be presentable – but no bag, there was no bag.

By the same token the shoes also become the embodiment of the remorseful conscience:

> Нет, закрыть, следует нож закрыть, иначе порежусь, в ботинок натечет... ботинки киллера (242).
>
> No, I've got to cover it, got to cover the knife, otherwise I'll cut myself, the blood will flow into the boot…a killer's boots.

Michael Riffaterre, in *Fictional Truth,* argues that repetition could serve as the reinforcement and intensification of style as well as the metonymic replacement of certain narrative features by their counterparts creating repetition as a device to propagate the same idea or image through stylistic techniques.[10] Such is the idea of Petrovich's ambivalent status, which his shoes metonymically represent.[11] The deviating subdivisions of the narrative, as well as repetitive patterns within the novel could be classified to a certain extent as techniques of "stream of consciousness," creating an image of the unstable and ambivalent consciousness of the protagonist.

The question of how the novel could be classified as chernukha literature still remains. On a thematic level, Makanin uses many situations that the chernukha of perestroika traditionally exploits: life in the dormitory, police corruption, the degradation of human dignity in the psychiatric ward. All of them reinforce chernukha's thematic objective: the exposure of society's evils. However, Makanin's novel stands apart from the traditions of the natural school and Astafiev's prose. The natural school, as I noted above, was interested in the relationship between the individual and her/his environment. This interest became its unifying principle. Other features of this trend function as off-shoots of this central characteristic, such as focusing on the "little man," social determinism, the physiology of social stratification and humanist pathos. In the case of Astafiev's novella, those explorations of the individual and his environment were taken from the tradition of the natural school, presenting the individual as a victim of time, corrupted morals and social injustice, as well as a strongly opinionated authorial stand within the novel. Makanin's novel inverts those tendencies.

Firstly, the subjective narration that I have described above inverts the central relationship between the individual and society, when "reality" becomes fully internalized and is presented from an entirely individualistic perspective. Secondly, the "typage" structure, which prominently figures in natural school and in chernukha of the perestroika period, is undermined by Petrovich's ambivalent status within the social stratification. Petrovich is an underground writer, who refuses to write anymore; at the same time he kills a KGB agent for taping him (the second murder) out of fear that his literary name will be forever tainted. He is a bum who reads Heidegger and tells his story in a very literary manner, reiterating, however, his disdain and distrust in the eternal values of the Russian literary tradition. Those are just few of the contradictions embodied in the protagonist figure. Petrovich breaks the strategy of naturalist physiology: he is both a resident of the underground (i.e. a dissident, a martyr, an intellectual) and a bum, a killer, a marginal figure with no status, but with an "ambition."

The double allusion to Dostoevsky within the novel is not accidental either: the title of the novel refers to his *Zapiski iz Podpolia* [Notes from Underground] (1864) and the phenomenon of the underground man and the whole theme of "ambition," ego and humiliation and Petrovich's murderous adventures obviously call to mind the figure of Rodion Raskolnikov. It is important to note that Dostoevsky is considered by criticism (Tseitlin, Vinogradov, Mann) as a figure "on the edge," who broke with the 19th century naturalist tradition. Yuri Mann writes that the elements that distinguish Dostoevsky from naturalism are:

> …выдвижение на первый план человека с «амбицией»..; и «фантастический колорит», т.е. устранение четкой грани между субъективно воспринимаемым и объективно данным; и отказ от диалектического и многогеройного ведения сюжета… в пользу одногеройного… (304)

> the placement of the person with "ambition" in the foreground..; and "fantastic colors," that is to say, the defamiliarization of the fine line between that which is subjectively perceived and objectively given; and the rejection of dialectic and the construction of a plot with many protagonists… in favor of a plot with a single protagonist…

Similarly Makanin moves from the naturalist tradition by introducing subjective narration, reducing "reality" to a mental state as well as by creating a contradictory image of the protagonist instead of a typical embodiment of social environment.

I have pointed out how naturalist chernukha of the perestroika period is ambiguously characterized by an abundance of the obscene details. The negative excess on the level of style of Astafiev's novella brings up the question of the marginal reading pleasure and the "radical expenditure" of the positive value of literary style (the aesthetic value of *belle lettres*, i.e. what is written should be beautiful). This excess also levels the social value of accusatory pathos, which is supposed to cultivate compassion rather than disgust in the reader's mind. In Makanin's work there is an abundance of obscene topics, however, the intensity of the physiological naturalist descriptions are not shocking as in *Liudochka*. The reason for that is that narrator describes the obscene and unpleasant events very casually, perceiving them as normal, a necessary part of life. Another cause for the indifferent tone in narrating the horrific is that it usually is combined with the commentary of the protagonist, relating his reflections upon events. The commentary usually appears as detached and ironic, juxtaposed with the horror of the narrated event, the detachment is reemphasized by the usage of brackets, which indicate protagonist's commentary and reaction. Thus, the descriptive mode of narration, usually the most powerful way of narrating the horrific – especially evident in the film as I will show in the next chapter – is negated by the argumentative mode, by the protagonist's vocalized thoughts. The commentary as well as the "normalization" of the disgusting and the horrific equates the narration with a common discourse about every-day life.

Thus, in the beginning of the novel, the protagonist listens to his drunken neighbor's story about how his wife cheated him and lost their one-year-old son in the midst of the Siberian winter. The cruel story is juxtaposed with the protagonist's commentary to the effect that the neighbor is just looking for sympathy in order to find out who his wife's new lover is.

> Я киваю. Я уже как-то слышал (но без подробностей) эту давнюю жутковатую и вполне бытовую историю о том, как Вера Курнеева потеряла ребенка. Как она металась туда-сюда, бегала, плакала...

> Нет. Нигде нет… (Курнеев глянул: как я? внимателен ли?) Вернулась в Москву без сына… Я отметил – по рукам, по его пальцам - не такой уж Курнеев пьяненький. Он и с рассказом теперь не спешил. (Уже подловил меня на жалости) (11-12).

> I nod. I have already heard somehow (but without the details) this old, harsh and entirely ordinary story about how Vera Kurneeva lost her child. How she rushed about here and there, ran, cried… No. Nowhere. (Kurneev glanced at me: how am I reacting? Am I paying attention?) She returned to Moscow without her son… I noticed by his hands, by his fingers, that he's not that drunk. Now he doesn't hurry with the story. (He's already caught me through pity.)

Therefore, Makanin's novel does not present an overwhelming presence of physiological and obscene details, which are balanced in the novel by the inner commentary and ironic reflection of the protagonist. Makanin's text represents a shift away from the traditions of the natural school as well as from the narrative strategies of chernukha of the perestroika period. However, I think that Makanin's novel could be well classified as chernukha literature.

The notion of negative excess, which I have discussed above, could also be found in the novel by Makanin. The point made by Lipovetsky about chernukha being a totalizing environment identifies a different type of excessive discourse. If for the natural school and for the chernukha of perestroika it is social "reality" that makes up the main focus of the narrative development, then for Makanin's novel the main focus is the internalization of the relationship between the individual and society. The strategy of internalization presents chernukha as a totalizing, devastating landscape of the psyche. Makanin is concerned with social reality and the turmoil of the perestroika period, the novel itself presents a panoramic view of the transformation the society underwent. However, the presence of the protagonist's psyche is pervasive. It encompasses the subjective narration and the repetitive idiosyncrasies (see the shoes theme) and internalizes the thematic focus well-known to be inherent to chernukha – that which is obscene and disgusting: in short, the abject.

That presence is totalizing, as in stream of consciousness, for example. It is a negative totality though, excessive in its encompassing drive. The internal perspective of the narrator is a reflection of the larger social perspective. However, this reflection is destructive, both for the internal and for the external realities. The fate of Russian literature and the martyrdom of the underground are intertwined with criminality and obscenity in its ugly daily occurrence of drinking, starving, fighting. The novel presents a paradoxical switch: the "reality" of the natural school has become internalized and cannot be socially determined, while the ambitious ego of later Dostoevsky is driven by predictable patterns of socially prescribed behaviour. This switch is best of all exemplified through the mirroring metaphors of underground and dormitory.

Two crucial metaphors, that of the dormitory and of the underground, are equally destructive mirror-images. It is the dormitory that prescribes social determinism but gives Petrovich the freedom not to abide by the social rules that dictate the struggle for "square meters" [*kvadratnye metry*]. Then, the underground, which is a symbol of freedom, provokes Petrovich to commit a socially unacceptable crime and entangles him in numerous socially restrictive institutions in the capacity of a common criminal, not a noble dissident. Mark Lipovetsky writes:

> По сути дела, андеграунд оказывается формой свободы, взращенной общагой и потому от общаги неотделимой. Андеграунд как тень общаги (Интернет ресурс: http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/1999/11/lipowez-pr.html).

> In essence, the underground is a form of freedom, cultivated by the dormitory, and thus is inseparable from the dormitory. The underground as the shadow of the dormitory (Online resource URL: http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/1999/11/ lipowez-pr.html).

The negative excess of Makanin's chernukha is the result of the collision and inversion of two incompatible worlds: the psyche and social reality, collective slavery (the dormitory) and individual freedom (the underground). The ambiguous status of the protagonist, which I have already discussed, adds weight to that argument. In a sense, this inversion within Makanin's text also pays homage to the tradition of the natural school, inasmuch as it reflects the turmoil, inversion of values and chaotic state of the transitional period of the early 1990s, as suggested in the provocative second part of the title: *The Hero of Our Time*.

The other important chernukha feature of Makanin's novel that I would like to touch upon is the metatextuality of the novel. If the mode of negative excess works in Makanin's text mainly as a deliberate effort to create a destructive combination of social and individual realities and to invert perspectives, then the metatextual allusions found in abundance within the text are intended to further another chernukha objective: representational failure. If in chernukha of the perestroika period the representational conventions were violated by excessive obscenity and, even more so, by the pleasure of marginal reading, then in Makanin's novel the project of subverting cultural representations is even more far-reaching.

The numerous references to Russian literature and the literary tradition as well as Petrovich's own metaphysical comments on the nature of the relations that Russians establish with their literary tradition provide an example of the subversion of the canonical worldview, which is to say, subversion of the Russian humanist literary tradition. Petrovich himself compares literature to the destructive and manipulative power of the totalitarian state, the power that establishes moral dominion and dictates the distribution of values. However, Petrovich makes many declarations that should not necessarily be trusted. The actual subversion of the representational authority of the "sacred" (i.e. literary) canon happens again on the level of mixing and juxtaposing the opposite visions.

Of course, the first thing the reader notices is the ambiguous title, which implies that the Underground Man (the humiliated and indecisive ambitious ego) becomes Pechorin (the ambitious ego that feels superior to others and believes itself to be above morals) referring the reader to Mikhail Lermontov's famous romantic novel *Geroi Nashego Vremeni* [Hero of Our Time] (1841). Petrovich seems to combine both aspects of the self-formation mentioned above. Furthermore, his name bears dual significance: it alludes to the casual form of address of the working class (there is a popular Russian urban folklore personage of Petrovich, the plumber) and, at the same time, Petrovich is, without doubt, intelligent and liberal. He belongs to the elite intelligentsia, which is why he is usually referred to as "the writer." Another element of subversion is the "Raskolnikov complex," which subverts Dostoevsky's tale of crime and repentance into a chernukha phantasmagoria of survival in the battle between a helpless individual and a cruel government embodied by the "psychiatric machine," which annihilates all individuality. The list of examples goes on. The end result is quite simple: literature cannot perform its sacred function anymore because the representational structures of respect and trust in literature and the ideal of "poet as prophet" have been shattered or inverted by the chaos of transition.

Therefore, chernukha in Makanin's novel manifests itself on the level of negative excessive inversion of the individual and of the collective, of reality and of consciousness, as well as on the level of subversion of and suspicion towards the traditional representational authorities of the literary canon, though that subversion is also ambiguous as is the protagonist's status of the "writer who quit." Chernukha in Makanin's version has undergone significant changes from the tradition of the natural school as well as from the chernukha of perestroika. Firstly, it has shifted the dialogical relationship of the individual to reality onto the level of narration, introducing a subjective totalizing perspective, in opposition to the authorial guidance and objective storytelling of the natural school. Secondly, it has replaced the characteristic of obscene, detailed physiological description inherent in the chernukha of perestroika with a more complex formula resulting in the destruction of the interior and exterior perspectives. All the characteristics of Makanin's work mentioned above will become stronger and even more original in the works of Liudmila Petrushevskaia.

3. Grotesque Chernukha in the Works of Liudmila Petrushevskaia.

Liudmila Petrushevskaia is a brilliant author with her own distinctive style. She is a sophisticated stylist and elaborate writer associated mainly with what one could call "high-brow" literature. She began writing in the late 1960s and her fiction was inaccessible and unacceptable until the era of the glasnost era that brought Petrushevskaia recognition of readers and critical circles.

With regards to chernukha, the critical discourse concerning Petrushevskaia varies. The majority of criticism acknowledges a number of aspects in her work that do fall under the category of chernukha. At the same time, chernukha art is perceived mainly in the neo-naturalist sense, confined to perestroika fiction of "grime and slime," i.e. a trend that has no potential in terms of elaborate style and artistic experiment. Thus, Petrushevskaia is unanimously declared an author of chernukha only on the surface, while in fact she speaks of more serious problems and is a more "serious" author. Mark Lipovetsky writes:

> Она [Петрушевская] обобщений не избегает, а, наоборот, отважно соединяет самый грязный быт с вековечными архетипами, у нее "чернуха" лишь материал, а мифологизация -- ее центральный, по сути дела, глубоко противоположный реалистической "типизации" прием (Интернет ресурс: http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/1999/11/lipowez-pr.html).
>
> She [Petrushevskaia] does not avoid generalizations, but, on the contrary, boldly combines the dirtiest details of everyday life with eternal archetypes, her "chernukha" is only material, but mythologization is her central method, deeply contradictory to realistic "typology" (Online resource URL: http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/1999/11/lipowez-pr.html).

Lipovetsky states quite justifiably that, firstly, Petrushevskaia's writing lacks the naturalist goal of the exposure of society's evils; secondly, Petrushevskaia's writing lacks a distinctive ideological stand; thirdly, chernukha in the works of such writers as Astafiev does follow the realist tradition of objective narrative, which is not the case with Petrushevskaia. Indeed, her narratives are intentionally subjective and usually represent the monologue of the protagonist, who is a "babbling" and unreliable narrator, incapable of providing a full picture (unlike Makanin's protagonist) or even to express herself freely.

> Often, however, her stories seem uncoordinated, with facts presented in illogical sequence, many repetitions and digressions, and numerous random fragments. The apparently chaotic structure is fully intentional, for Petrushevskaia invests heavily in the personality and attitudes of her narrator, who, despite the rambling and loose-jointed quality of her monologue, manages to maintain a consistent point of view. (Brown, 153)

This is true for the majority of her stories and novellas. The narrative is presented as *skaz*, with all the digressions and repetitions of oral language. The language of Petrushevskaia is intentionally non-literary, colloquial, and subjective.

Another important aspect of Petrushevskaia's works is the overwhelming presence of language that relates to bodily functions – not only the obscene aspects but also relating to the discourse of the mutilated body: suffering, sick, violated. Physical violence, such as rape, abortion, prostitution and disease are the main topics Petrushevskaia explores. At the same time Petrushevskaia's narrators treat the incessant flow of violence and pain with indifference, in a dry and report-like manner, which creates a further, shocking effect for the reader, who is not given a chance to feel sympathy or compassion.

Julia Kristeva, in her theory of abjection, conceptualizes the dead body as the ultimate abjection. Kristeva writes:

> A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell, of sweat, of decay, does not signify death…The corpse seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. (*Powers of Horror*, 3-4)

The abject, according to Kristeva, is "neither subject, nor object," but rather something that disturbs order and escapes signification. The dead body represents a border that cannot be culturally inscribed and violates life as the transgression into incomprehensibility. The same idea of the dead body as the site of escape from cultural inscription is developed in chernukha film by Alexander Sokurov *The Second Circle*, which I examine in the next chapter. Petrushevskaia's attention to the violated body, the constant presence of death in her stories presents what Kristeva calls "control of the abject," namely through sublimation in literature. Petrushevskaia treats the body as the abject, as the borderline reality of lost meaning and violated cultural norms; this is why her characters are subject to uncontrollable and inexplicable suffering. They narrate the most horrific events with casual, indifferent narration. Examples include: the story of a girl having miscarriage in the outhouse (*Bogema* [Bohemians]); a female alcoholic, who gets thrown off the balcony by her boyfriend (*Ali Baba*); an old couple that dies alone, watching each other's agony (*Chopin and Mendelssohn*) – to name but a few. Just like the commodification of the dead body in the *Second Circle*, in Petrushevskaia's works the abject is presented using the language of daily reality. She combines the primal fear of the abject, the "weight of meaninglessness," the transgression beyond any identity and fixed system, with the everyday language of shopping, casual chat or gossip. That juxtaposition allows Petrushevskaia to incorporate the heterogeneous abjection into homogenous "reality," creating a vision of the proximity of horror and banality to everyday life. Out of that basic premise of the proximity of the abject to everyday reality Petrushevskaia develops another combination of incompatible elements which I will discuss further in terms of defining Petrushevskaia's vision as grotesque chernukha.[12]

I will analyze a novella by Liudmila Petrushevskaia *Our Crowd* (1979, published in 1989), which I hope will help to expand the notion of chernukha. The novella was written long before it was published. Petrushevskaia was a banned author because of her negative vision and "dark" subject matter, which could not be approved by the Soviet guardians of Socialist Realism. I chose the novella as one of the most famous of her works, which made her reputation in perestroika and post-Soviet literature as well as in the West (this is her first translated work).

The story is told by a woman-narrator, who is presumably middle-aged and belongs to the intelligentsia. The narrator tells the reader about her close company of friends. All of them are semi-dissidents, typical representatives of the intelligentsia of the stagnation period under Brezhnev's rule [*zastoi*], scientists without distinguished careers but who are somewhat promising. This intimate circle has been gathering together for many years on Fridays for drinking and partying. They all have uneasy love-hate relations with each other, as well as a few love triangles, which are rather trivial. However, all the members of the closed circle consider themselves to be especially enlightened by their intimate company as well as by their silent dissidence.

The narrator's parents die; she herself is going blind and suspects that she is dying of a genetically transmitted incurable disease. Meanwhile, her husband abandons her for the central figure of their closed circle – Marisha – who represents "the spirit of the crowd" [*dusha kompanii*] and an "object of desire" for every one of its members. The narrator gathers all her friends at her house on Easter then declares that she intends to send her son Alesha to the orphanage and then she beats him up cruelly in front of her friends, who are outraged and take Alesha with them away from the monstrous mother. Then the reader learns that this was her intention all along, as it was the only way she could force her friends and her former husband into taking care of her son after her death. The protagonist understands that her friends are primarily concerned with maintaining their intellectual image, compassionate and wise in all respects. They are concerned about how to look decent without necessarily being decent. This is exemplified well in the episode when the policeman, who happens to be at one of the Friday parties, is surrounded by their patronizing care and attention so that they, advanced and enlightened people, could observe and investigate a representative of the ignorant masses.

The narrator herself represents a contrast to the rest of the group. She is cynical, ironic, too bold and aggressive in her judgments, which, nonetheless, appear to be the unspoken truth for everybody. The narrator verbalizes the complexes members of the crowd have (Jewish eyes, sexual zones, teenage sex). Petrushevskaia constantly juxtaposes her to Marisha, the admirable and "perfect" heart of the circle. The narrator, unlike Marisha, is dying and represents death, not life. Her sinister behaviour is the conduct of a person who is going to die abandoned and unloved.

The narrator is of course far from being perfect and provides unreliable narration, a situation in which the reader finds clues throughout the narrative that resemble Freudian slips in order to learn the real course of events. Helena Goscilo notes that Petrushevskaia starts the novella with the allusion to Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* inviting the reader to make an analogy with its narrator and his "aggressive self-justification," which is the sign of an incomplete perspective (as I have mentioned above, the narrator is "selective omniscience,"), meaning that by…

> …reading against the trajectory of narrator's plot, the reader discovers in the gaps a more compelling counterversion of the events…By endowing the narrator's progressive blindness as a premonitory symptom of her disease, Petrushevskaia metaphorically intimates that her melodramatic solution to the dilemma of Alesha's future semi-orphaned state may be myopic – a failure of perception (*Mother as Mothra*, 55).

The choice of the unreliable narrator who could be consciously deceptive in order to justify herself is a significant one. What is important is that there is no way to know the real story and any "Freudian clues" will be at least partial, at most misleading.

The choice of the unreliable narrator gives the reader always a partial knowledge, if not misleads the reader by suggesting different versions of the events.[13] That partial knowledge even develops on the level of the *fabula*, as there is no way to be sure what has actually taken place. Petrushevskaia creates a narrative in which there is a complete breakdown of communication with the reader on the level of perception, on the level of the *fabula*, as well as within the storyline (*siuzhet*). The significance of the strategy here is that the communication with the reader is also deceivingly incomplete and there is no coherence between the reader's perception, the course of events and the narration. Communication between the members of the closed circle is virtually non-existent, and the heroine invents such an intrigue precisely because there is no way to convey her message other than to construct a lie that demonizes her and elevates the others.

The confused reader is not presented with a puzzle, a complicated intertextual play, experimental literary conventions (which again are characteristic of avant-garde texts), which need to be deciphered out of the context. The reader is presented with a void, which destroys all voices and all points of view as an insufficient means of communication or insufficient comprehensive devices to convey the message of mortal suffering and pain (the narrator is, after all, dying). Sally Dalton-Brown, in her study of Petrushevskaia's genres *Voices from the Void* (2000) lists the annihilation of reliable representations and voices as a generic feature of Petrushevskaia's style:

> [Petrushevskaia's texts] are based on the principles of negation, nullity, and negativity. Every romance is parodied, every success undermined, every character defeated.., in a series of mutually self-cancelling binary oppositions which present not a dialectic but a struggle to the reader. This struggle is that of narration that strangles itself…into silence (17).

Thus, Petrushevskaia's texts negate signification inside and outside the story (on the *fabula* and *siuzhet* levels), denying representational power to the characters and to the narrator as well as denying the reader conventional communication with the text, i.e. the full picture or at least a mostly complete picture of the story. This annihilation of representational agents (characters, narrator, author, reader) is achieved through textual strategies such as: subversion of the norm as a social value; body-related language (usually language of violence and mutilation); grotesque style of representation, achieved through the proximity of the horrific (abjection) and banal.

The subversive quality of Petrushevskaia's works has been noted by many critics.[14] *Our Crowd* in its turn is a total subversion of the family as a sacred entity or social unit, indicating the disintegration of social and the sacred (ethical) spaces. They disintegrate due to the proximity of the abject, which, according to Kristeva, is always present within the sacred domain as its violation (taboo or transgressing the law). As Helena Goscilo notes, Petrushevskaia's narratives subvert the "natural" social vision of family and especially the figure of the mother. In *Our Crowd* the closed circle of friends are people engaged in incestuous-like activities, child abuse, infidelity and other destructive actions that ruin the natural perception of family and the maternal role. The narrator also creates an ambivalent image of a cruel/sacrificial mother, bringing in abjection (the innocent ignorant child is beaten until he bleeds) with the normative exertion of a mother's duty: the salvation of her child (self sacrifice for his good).

Another image that is subverted by Petrushevskaia is that of innocent and beautiful childhood, free of suffering. That image is taken from Soviet cultural myths, which are the closest context for the narrator and for Petrushevskaia personally, who might as well remember the famous slogan "Thank you, comrade Stalin, for our happy childhood!" [*Spasibo tovarishchu Stalinu za nashe schastlivoe detstvo!*] The narrator's son is portrayed as a boy with rotten teeth and no talents, who wets his pants. The image of an innocent and beautiful childhood is subverted here through physiological, unpleasant details that are not associated with children but are common to chernukha. Children are often pathetic, pitiful, who suffer most out of all the creatures in Petrushevskaia's world. Another example is the traumatized child from *Time Night* (1998), who has a nervous blinking habit and is described as thin, pitiful, starving; again cold and wet from urine on several occasions.

The power of subversion is increased with the detached description of the events and the casual narration of pain, suffering and death that Petrushevskaia employs. She introduces a horrific amount of physiological details, which are portrayed in a report-like manner, presenting them as a normal everyday environment, which is not acknowledged by the narrator as shocking. For example:

> У меня в тот же период тихо догорела мать…и врачи под самый конец взялись найти у нее несуществующий гнойник, вскрыли ее, случайно пришили кишки к брюшине и оставили умирать с незакрывающейся язвой величиной с кулак, и когда нам ее выкатили умершую, вспоротую и кое-как зашитую до подбородка и с этой дырой в животе, я не представляла себе, что такое вообще может произойти с человеком, и начала думать, что это не моя мама, а моя-то мама где-то в другом месте. (*Poslednii Etazh* [The Last Floor], 290)

> During that same period my mother quietly slipped away…and at the very end the doctors set out to find a non-existent abscess inside her, opened her up,

> accidentally sewed her intestine to her peritoneum and left her to die with an open wound the size of a fist, and when they wheeled her out to us, dead, ripped up, and then sewn up any which way right up to the chin, and with this hole in her stomach, I found it inconceivable that a thing like that could possibly happen to a person, and I started thinking that this wasn't my mother, that my mother was someplace else… (Goscilo, Helena. ed. *Glasnost Anthology*, 17)

That part of the text describes the horrifying death of the mother. The metaphor of the hole in the body stands for the hole of the grave, the hole that sucks all life into it. Death comes into narrative through bodily metaphors. However, right after that body of text there is a passage that reinforces the situation of shock by a radical switch to unrelated matters and by pointing out the indifference the heroine is faced with when coping with the death around her:

> Коля не принимал участия во всех этих процедурах, мы ведь были с ним формально разведены уже лет пять назад, только оба не платили за развод, помирившись на простом совместном проживании как у мужа и жены и без претензий, жили вместе, как живут все, а тут он оказывается взял и заплатил за развод и после похорон так трезво мне предложил, чтобы и я заплатила, и я заплатила (290)
>
> Kolia had no part in all these proceedings; we'd been officially divorced then for five years, only neither of us had paid for the divorce, we'd agreed simply to live together like everyone else when suddenly it turned out that he'd gone and paid for a divorce and after the funeral he quite sensibly suggested that I should also pay, and I did. (17)

That example is rather typical for *Our Crowd*, and constitute the constant technique used by Petrushevskaia to reinforce the collision of incompatibles, the body-related language driven by the power of the abject and the banal affairs of everyday life, cruel in their very banality, abjectified through proximity to the mutilated body as much as the mutilated body is commodified by the everyday. That inversion, already present in Makanin's work and the inverted vision of individual and collective, becomes especially strong in Petrushevskaia's novella through the discourse of the body.

The body related language and imagery is a prominent feature of all of Petrushevskaia's texts, in which bodies are mutilated and become abnormal bodies. Helena Goscilo writes with regards to "body language" in *Our Crowd*:

> Here as elsewhere Petrushevskaia conceives of the body as a site of violence, of hyperbolized ingestion and regurgitation – ins and outs of all sorts through all available orifices. (*Body Talk in Current Fiction*, 150).

The physiological detail, however, acquires a symbolic meaning in Petrushevskaia's works, pointing out the violent nature of human relations as well as manifesting the space of broken communication, when it is not the spirit but the body that becomes a disintegrating space of absent representations and muted voices.

Lipovetsky also points out that Petrushevskaia uses mythologization and symbolization as an artistic device. Death in *Our Crowd* bears a special symbolic significance: at the end the narrator talks about her next "encounter" with her son on Easter, at the cemetery.[15] Easter, the symbol of resurrection, stands for the acceptance of death as much as for the rejection of life within the "crowd." The existential or metaphysical significance of Petrushevskaia's works is also pointed out by Helena Goscilo, who sees in the heroines of Petrushevskaia the embodiment of tragic figures, combining the existential terror of the tragedies of antiquity in the space of everyday physiology. Both critics state that this sort of existentialist inquiry is not something chernukha literature will explore. That is why they insist that Petrushevskaia's works do not represent chernukha, but rather use it as raw material.

I argue, however, that Petrushevskaia transforms chernukha's essential elements to integrate it into her stylistic system. Petrushevskaia makes use of chernukha aesthetics as part of her artistic vision. Almost all works by Petrushevskaia concentrate on uneasy issues like death and pain, abuse and suffering. However, not all literary depictions of violence and pain could be considered chernukha. Petrushevskaia's chernukha is presented through the negative vision of abjection penetrating daily life, which makes the abnormalities of human existence casual, natural and common place. Thus, with regards to the above quotation: it becomes normal and casual in Petrushevskaia's chernukha to see one's mother cut and then sewn together by doctors as much as it becomes abjection to divorce a woman who suffered a loss. In a way, Petrushevskaia replaces the dialectics of the individual and reality of the natural school with much more powerful and horrific dialectics of reality and abjection, a dialogue of contest about what causes more dread: death or *byt* [daily life]. The essential chernukha drive for total negation and obscene detail is preserved in the new grotesque fashion that exceeds the boundaries of the negative stylistic excess set by the neo-naturalist trend. The inversion of reality and the psyche, collective and individual in the totalizing negativity of the chernukha world as seen in Makanin's text is intensified in Petrushevskaia by the total subversion of all cultural constructions as well as the communicational breakdown of all representations, values and other human inventions such as compassion, love and forgiveness.

As I will show in the next chapter, in chernukha film the same prominent chernukha elements exist in diverse applications by different authors, but the core characteristics remain the same: i.e. the representational annihilation, manifested through communicational breakdown on the formal and content level of the narrative; the excessive physiological detail, drawn to the body and its manifestations; the transgression into the shadowy zone of taboo and abjection, marginal existence and abnormal spaces. Chernukha, it seems, is primarily characterized by the totality of negative impulses that can manifest itself differently and acquire different qualities as it transgresses genres and trends.

Petrushevskaia applies chernukha aesthetics through the means of grotesque. Natalia Ivanova in her article on Petrushevskaia argues that Petrushevskaia's prose fits within the definitions of the Bakhtinian grotesque, which she understands as the ambivalent juxtaposition of death and life; bodily functions and the metaphysics of the soul. In many respects I agree with Ivanova's emphasis on the ambivalence and juxtaposition of the opposites in Petrushevskaia's work. Ivanova believes that the liberating laughter of Bakhtin is introduced into Petrushevskaia's oeuvre through liberation from the ideological constraints of Soviet ideology, which denied the body its obscene and fragile nature. However, as pointed out by Helena Goscilo, Petrushevskaia lacks the most fundamental aspect of Bakhtinian grotesque, namely the "liberating laughter:" the subversion of hierarchy that results in the jovial unity with the archaic body, the all-embracing folk mythology of the circle of life and death.

The two clashing criticisms here reflect a long debated issue about whether the affirmative aspects of the Bakhtinian concept of carnival, such as liberating laughter, return to an archaic unity with nature and other aspects are the sole aspects that constitute the carnival culture (see the *Rethinking Bakhtin* collection). There are interpretations of the carnival grotesque stating it is not as pacifying and jovial as it might seem. My personal position is that we have to keep in mind that Mikhail Bakhtin drew his conclusions on grotesque through the oeuvre of Rabelais, whose novels are full of obscene and subversive elements that are, however, not frightening or disgusting, but humorous and tolerant of all physicality as a part of human nature. They do not, in short, seem to represent the abject and to possess the "powers of horror." However, to remove myself from the controversy around Bakhtinian concept I will discuss grotesque in Petrushevskaia in terms of abjection and horror rather than carnival subversion and ambivalence.

Petrushevskaia's grotesque, to my mind, is an uncanny grotesque of the "estranged and alienated world" of Modernist and Romantic grotesque (Wolfgang Kaiser). The ironic detachment brings a good deal of black humour and sarcasm into her stories. However, they are generally not funny, but instead rather frightening and cause the opposites to collide rather than pacifying them. The episode when the narrator states that she could not believe that it was her mother when she saw the mutilated grotesque body proves that grotesque here functions as intrusion and imposition of the abject, a forceful recognition of the horrific rather than an all-embracing joviality of folk grotesque. Grotesque in Petrushevskaia's texts should be understood as a two clashing opposites creating a sense of abnormality with no humorous resolution, it is defined as "ambivalently abnormal," being a result of juxtaposing horrific and banal. Petrushevskaia presents a chernukha grotesque, which juxtaposes the abject, often in its ultimate form (dead body, or mutilated suffering body) presented through physiological detail, with the casual description; the radical communicational breakdown with the incessant flow of speech of the monologue.

The last scene in *Our Crowd* exemplifies the notion of grotesque mentioned above. The description of Alesha, choking on his own blood while his mother beats him, is juxtaposed with the vomit of Marisha, supposedly Alesha's new mother, which grotesquely matches the colour of blood:

> Я заперлась на засов. Мой расчет был верным. Они все как один не могли видеть *детской крови [курсив мой]*, они могли спокойно разрезать друг друга на части, но ребенок, дети для них святое дело. Я прокралась на кухню и выглянула в окно, поверх *полузатертой Маришиной свеклы.* Мне недолго было ждать. (294)

> I locked the sliding bolt. My calculations had been perfect. Not one of them could bear to see a *child's blood*; they could calmly slice each other into pieces, but a child – children were something sacred to them. I stole into the kitchen and looked out the window just above Marisha's *half-smeared-off beets*. I didn't have long to wait (italics are mine, 23).

Petrushevskaia's grotesque engages the obscene physiology of daily routine (vomiting, alcoholism) and the "existential" horrors (death, blood, and suffering child). This approach reinforces the chernukha aesthetics of negative excessive vision and representational failure, manifested through subversion when the clashing counterparts of the grotesque vision annihilate each other, leaving the reader in the void of pure negation, which is death, mutation and violence. And here the symbolic function of the existential condition does not contradict the chernukha aesthetics but raises them instead to a new level of stylistic applications, when chernukha's negative vision serves as the background for the existentialist tragedy through the means of grotesque. Therefore, in Petrushevskaia's novella chernukha does not exist as a totalizing discourse or generic model, but rather as the implication of a grotesque-like style that exemplifies and visualizes death, suffering and pain.

I have demonstrated that chernukha in literature represents a transgressive art mode, which is present in texts of different cultural statuses. Chernukha in literature inherits a lot from the naturalism of the 19th century, but with its development and broad application it gradually removes itself from the traditions of social determinism, "typage" and thematic exploration of social ills, towards a more elaborate vision of taboo and its violation, inversion of cultural values and representations and grotesque juxtaposition of the abject and the daily. Chernukha in all three works analyzed presents the core chernukha qualities as a unified phenomenon within the diversity of vectors that the literary works present. In the next chapter I plan to illustrate the development of chernukha art in Russian film through the core characteristics of negative excess, representational failure, focus on taboo and obscenity manifested through the discourse of physiological and bodily expressions. Analogous to the literary analysis of three texts I chose three films that possess a diverse cultural status and formal systems. I have chosen a ground-breaking hit of perestroika – *Little Vera* – as an example of mass production confined to the chernukha style of the early perestroika years. Next, a film with a somewhat ambivalent status, which combines the traditions of intellectual *auteur cinema* with the dynamics of a Hollywood production: *Taxi Blues*. And finally, I have chosen *The Second Circle*, a film by Alexander Sokurov – a high brow production for the elite viewer.

Chapter II. Chernukha in the Post-Soviet Film

The very term "chernukha" in reference to art was first established in film criticism, indicating a trend in perestroika cinema that tended to concentrate on societal problems with a thorough depiction of the gloomy and evil sides of Post-Soviet reality. The former taboo zones (prostitution, poverty, alcoholism, sex, violence, criminal underworld, drugs etc.) of Soviet ideology were revealed with enthusiasm and excitement by chernukha films. Chernukha films also concentrated on the negative reappropriation of the Soviet past, vividly exploring the nasty sides of Soviet reality: communal apartments, the terror of the Stalinist era, the problems of survival in the society of "socialist abundance" and the generation gap created by shattered ideological beliefs.

At first chernukha was accepted as "the truth about our life," then critics became outraged at the unceasing flow of chernukha's gloomy and ugly discourse. The emblem for chernukha art became the following descriptive passage from M. Levitin's article in *Sovetskyi Ekran* [*Soviet Screen*] in 1989:

> It is a really amazing thing this Glasnost in feature films…it boils down to active sexualization, partial narcotization, and formal anti-Stalinization of the screen… [Critic] Andrei Dementiev… [when] asked to describe contemporary Soviet cinema [said]: "A naked woman sits before a portrait of Stalin and smokes marijuana." It is as if the words: 'You may!' were pronounced… Clichés, clichés, clichés (Cited from Lawton, Anna *Kinoglasnost*, p.201).

However, chernukha films caused such an outrage not only because of their focus on taboo zones (such as sex and drugs) or negative visions of the past. The latter tendency constitutes the core of Glasnost literature, affected by the documental (or pseudo-documental) and journalistic genres, which lent favouritism to the value of documentary truthfulness [истинность] over the aesthetic value of art.[16] While the journalistically oriented prose that revealed the secrets of the constructed Soviet past flourished as much as the documentary cinema, chernukha films were condemned as clichéd and sinister. The main reason for the last accusation was that these fictional films failed the viewers' expectations of providing an alternative to the horrors of collapsing society: chernukha did not promote a positive ideology or any value system. In short, chernukha art represented a contradiction to the cultural inscription of the mission of art in Russian society from the 19th century to the present day: namely, the noble mission of education and salvation, which art and artists bring to their country and countrymen. Birgit Beumers writes:

> The mainstream of Russian cinema largely indulges in this bleakness, or blackness, and offers neither alternative nor perspective. Film-makers have rejected their "mission" to act as prophets…or to guide morally and aesthetically. The audience, in turn, rejects films, which offer no positive outlook or spiritual guidance amid the chaos, and have turned instead to Latin American soap operas… (*Russia on Reels*, 1)

Chernukha film goes against the traditions of art being a prophetic, world-saving practice with divine sanction. The narration of the hopeless, depressing existence of the wretched and pitiful or arrogant and violent characters arouses no sympathy. Any sympathy that might be evoked is undermined by the turmoil the characters undergo, creating a dark gloomy atmosphere.

Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky, in their influential study of the cinema of Glasnost *The Zero Hour*, present the typical chernukha film story based on the example of *Sobachii Pir* [Dogs' Feast] (dir. Leonid Menaker, 1990) concluding that the only impression the viewer can get from that film is that of "suffocation and utter depression:"

> An ugly… cleaning woman, Jeanna, drags home an alcoholic, Arkady. He pays her…no attention, though… he cannot function on his own. These two outcasts at the bottom of the Soviet social ladder are two against each other and against the world. The relentless grittiness of Jeanna's apartment, the shabbiness of their personal lives (Arkady tries to have an affair with the next-door neighbor), and the hopelessness of their situation (both are alcoholics), leads to a suicide-murder conclusion (165).

Despite the especially gloomy and depressing narrative structure, chernukha art was primarily visually abusive, describing crime and slime with all the power of the cinematographic medium. It is not a coincidence that chernukha flourished in the visual arts before its literary counterpart. The dark vision of transitional society or its totalitarian past became extremely powerful in the visual imagery, displayed in depictions of suburban apartment-block districts [новостройки] or the slime of the old cities like Saint Petersburg; in depictions of the standardized small apartments accommodating several generations of the same family or the endless corridors of the communal flats; in depictions of the provincial towns dying of economic and social stagnation. Chernukha in film also held special visual shock-value for the Soviet viewer in the violent scenes of crime, corruption, drug addiction, and brutal sex. It was something the eye of a Soviet citizen had never witnessed before.

However, it is hard to attest to the claim that chernukha films tended to repeat themselves from the perspective of the narrative development, reproducing the discourse of clichés, an inescapable pattern of what one could find in all chernukha films. Therefore, Horton and Brashinsky theorize that quality of chernukha of the perestroika period as a generic one:

> This is *chernukha*, a Soviet slang idiom meaning something like "pitch darkness" – the new semigenre, or even antigenre, zooming in on all the dark, nasty, clumsy,

> ugly, barbaric, immoral…(the list may be continued by the reader) sides of contemporary Soviet life and private life, in particular (163).

Horton and Brashinsky acknowledge the naturalist roots of chernukha phenomenon but deny it a new cinematic language, stating that it lived like a parasite on the old Soviet cinematic forms for the sake of chernukha content.

> It is not a valuable genre, however, since its artistic language is still neglected…The generic formula is wholly based on the subject matter, which is "life itself," "life in general," the favorite Russian expression meaning formlessness… (163)

The two critics see the reason for that in the conditions of perestroika. The boundless possibilities of artistic innovation after the fall of Socialist Realist restrictions created difficulty in finding a new language for art. It was a certain "cultural paralysis" (a term coined by Valentin Tolstykh) when having the freedom of speech (in a figurative sense) does not mean the ability to use it.

Thus, the majority of chernukha of the perestroika period films did follow the same narrative pattern; such are *Little Vera* (dir. V. Pichul, 1989), *Muzh i Doch Tamary Aleksandrovny* [Tamara Aleksandrovna's Husband and Daughter] (dir. O. Narutskaia, 1989*), Utoli Moia Pechali* [Assuage My Sorrows] (dir. A. Alexandrov & V. Prokhorov, 1989), *Dog's Feast* (dir. L. Menaker, 1990) and many others, usually of extremely poor quality (which brings us back to one of the aspects of chernukha term which is poor quality, unprofessional").[17] Generally, little praise was given to chernukha films at home or abroad (with the exception of *Little Vera*, which gained much attention as a ground-breaking anti-Communist film).

However, there were certain successes in the field of *auteur cinema* that became associated with chernukha art, i.e. Kira Muratova's *Astenicheskii Sindrom* [The

Weakness Syndrome] (1990) and Pavel Loungine's *Taxi Blues* (1990), which I chose for my analysis. I also include *The Second Circle* (dir. by Alexander Sokurov, 1990) as an example of the chernukha highbrow experiments. The films belong to "highbrow" culture, though the elements of chernukha discourse, as well as the clichés mentioned above, are also present in those productions.

The question I intend to address in this chapter is based on the paradox discussed above: whether chernukha film is a clichéd discourse lacking cinematic innovation or if its existence among "high art" films indicates broader implications for the term. I do not deny that the chernukha phenomenon produced narrative patterns that critics condemn as clichés and a reaction to the newly acquired freedom of speech.[18] However, as I have noted in the previous chapter, the same was said about chernukha in literature. Dealing with the literary development of the chernukha style, I have argued that chernukha possesses a transgressive nature which exceeds the boundaries of genre, time period and trend. The extended transgressive conception of the phenomenon deals with the evolution of chernukha, namely from a neonaturalist trend into the grotesque sophisticated chernukha of Liudmila Petrushevskaia. This development bears certain formal features common to all chernukha works and defines it as a complex phenomenon in contemporary Russian art.

In accordance with the same criteria I will take few specific cinematic works that reflect the ambiguous nature of the chernukha phenomenon: "authentic" perestroika films, which are most reflective of chernukha as it is known in film criticism such as *Little Vera*, and another production that I will also briefly examine *Friend of the Deceased* (dir. Viacheslav Krishtofovich, 1997); then I will focus on a production, which blends intellectual cinema and the genre movie with a post-Soviet chernukha backdrop, Pavel Loungine's *Taxi Blues*; finally I will examine a representative of *auteur cinema,* Alexander Sokurov's *The Second Circle*. The last two films are more ambivalent in terms of classifying them as chernukha, especially *The Second Circle*. My objective is to trace chernukha aesthetics and its conceptual premises in those films in order to demonstrate that chernukha is a unified phenomenon. I also intend to analyze the development and the transgressive nature of the chernukha art mode through exploring the differences that the productions display. I will focus on two particular features: the descriptive mode of the cinematic text and the negative quality of chernukha, the notion of negative excess, which rejects all discursive representations and cultural constructions and which I have attributed to the chernukha in literature.

Chernukha's negative and destructive totality could be described as an "excessive mode" within the system of formal features and the content of chernukha art. As I have mentioned before, in the writings of Georges Bataille the notion of negative excess is the primal drive and attraction to the abject (the sites of violence, death, sexuality, physicality). The excessive nature of those sites of violence (which, according to Bataille, are ultimately connected to death, the "utmost abject") is embodied in the rites of expenditure and radical taboo violations. Bataille's notions of excess, also based upon physicality, obscenity and violation of rules, still bear a pure negative drive that aims to destroy the culturally inscribed norms (as Michel Foucault pointed out). If a taboo was meant to be violated, as Bataille states, it still exists on the edge of reason and culturally inscribed means of signification. Therefore, negative excess is linked not only to obscenity and disgust but also to the destruction of cultural representations.

The negative quality of chernukha cinema is widely acknowledged specifically on the level of content (Horton and Brashinsky, Lawton). However, the stylistic manifestations of excessive negativity and the transgression of cultural taboos have also been discussed. In his study *Chernukha and Russian Film* Seth Graham mentions that chernukha presents a "concentrated physicality" as an excessive artistic vision:

> Two crucial elements of cinematic chernukha… are: 1) subordination of the verbal signifier… to the visual…image (I read this element as part of the assertive physicality of the form); and 2) a radical, indiscriminate, and ostentatious rejection of all ideals, especially those that are culturally-marked (14).

In order to elaborate on that argument I suggest that the two aspects mentioned above are conjoined: that is, the rejection of all culturally manufactured ideals is manifested in the subversion of logos, i.e. the rational and linguistic encoding of human experience. The limit of semiotic justification is simultaneously the limit of verbal expression. Therefore, the negation of cultural inscription is manifested through the rejection and destruction of language, which means an emphasis on the non-verbal elements (such as the attention to body and its functions in Petrushevskaia's works) as well as in the inversion of the cultural values (like the inversion of individual and collective in Makanin), a more ambivalent production, which blends intellectual cinema and the genre movie with a post-Soviet chernukha backdrop, and the exploration of socially inscribed taboos. The visual or auditory "non-verbal" representations are intrinsically connected in film with the system of style (Bordwell and Thompson).

In my analysis of chernukha literature the notion of negative excess manifested itself mainly on the formal level of style and narrative structure (while the thematics was limited to the naturalist legacy). The negative excess is displayed through: the intensity of language, obscenity and physicality, which creates marginal pleasure (Astafiev); the inversion of cultural values (Makanin); and the grotesque collision of the abject and banality (Petrushevskaia). In the present chapter I will also emphasize the formal analysis and not just thematic investigation, showing that chernukha is not confined to "dark" subject matter but also develops an artistic technique. My objective is to establish the similarities and differences between literature and cinema, as well as to trace chernukha development in the cinema. The means for my analysis are: exploration of the role that description as a narrative mode plays in chernukha film and the application of the concept of film form and its components as theorized by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson.

In describing the descriptive mode of the text, I refer to Seymour Chatman's narratological study *Coming to Terms: the Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. What particularly interests me in this study is the division between the text-types Chatman introduces and then examines in different mediums. The text-types Chatman employs are: Narrative, Description and Argument.

> The text-types routinely operate at each other's service...Narrators of the novels routinely digress to describe or argue, describers to narrate or argue, and arguers to narrate or describe… The study of texts is at once simplified and enriched by the notion of service. Text-types are underlying (or overriding) structures that can be actualized by different surface forms (Chatman, 11).

Chatman takes many of his notions from the narratological studies of Jean Genette and Wayne Booth, as well as from Christian Metz's film criticism, specifically his piece on descriptive syntagma, the main idea of which is that description in the cinema is rendered by consecutive shots in a relationship of simultaneity to each other. The idea of "service" allows the texts to shift among different text-types, as well as to manipulate and subsume each other.

Description in cinema as theorized by Chatman has a few crucial characteristics of interest to this study: firstly, Chatman acknowledges that the very medium of cinema can't help but be descriptive. However, that does not deny the existence of the descriptive mode within cinematic narratives as a separate text-type. The presence of description could be tacit (meaning non-insistent, submerged in the ongoing action and implicitly selective) or "description-by-prowling," when *mise-en-scene* is rendered to illustrate "properties, not actions" (43). An example of this is the discotheque scene in *Little Vera*, when the camera explores different angles of the discotheque space, not necessarily focusing on the protagonist and her actions.

Secondly, the distinction between Story and Discourse[19] is crucial for understanding the functioning of description in cinema. Description happens outside of the narrative timeframe and provides an additional, separate "descriptive" vision rather than the actual frame of the story. In chernukha films I will look for the descriptive text-type as part of Discourse and a "pause" in the story. Another good example of that is the introductory shot of the city in *Little Vera*, whose smoking industrial chimneys and cramped apartment buildings set the mood of the story before any action takes place.

I will provide insights in the chernukha film style and how the stylistic components in chernukha films play a decisive role in determining the incorporation of the phenomenon within those texts. I realize that a formal system within cinema differs from that of a literary text. To take this difference into account, I adopt the notion of a stylistic system as theorized by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson in *Film Art: an Introduction*. The authors introduce the notion of "film form" as a holistic system of narrative interrelations. Film form also includes stylistic elements that are confined to the usage of cinematographic techniques in a given film that formulate or could be patterned in a significant and meaningful structure. Those techniques are: *mise-en-scene*, cinema (shot and frame), editing and sound. Bordwell and Thompson stress the importance of analyzing film form as a system in which no element exists outside of the elemental relationships. The special attention given to the stylistic form enables this study to follow up with a description of crucial stylistic features within chernukha film and how they contribute to shaping/altering the narrative structures of chernukha film.

1. Chernukha in the Era of Glasnost: *Little Vera*.

Little Vera (dir. Vassily Pichul, 1988) is a ground-breaking feature in many respects: it was the first Soviet film to feature nudity and sexual intercourse. It was one of the few Perestroika movies that gained popularity and significant international attention. Furthermore, it was the first Soviet taboo-breaking feature film that was actually enjoyed by the Soviet people (statistics claim 50 million people watched *Little Vera* in the course of one year).[20] It was one of the first "dark" films about the Soviet youth: exploring the generation gap, the downfall of mores and shattered values in the era of Glasnost.

Little Vera belongs to a trend that came into being in the late 1980s, first in documentary films, later in feature films. That trend focused on youth culture and the generation gap inadequacies. Documentaries about youth issues and attitudes were concerned with problems that had long been denied: drugs and alcoholism, child abuse and teen suicide, gangs and homelessness, the conditions in orphanages, finally, the ruined lives of the young men returning from Afghanistan.[21] However, the major pathos of the "youth" documentaries lay in the domain of ethical values and the inadequacy of the former ideologies to guide or ameliorate the younger generations of Soviet citizens. Ideology that did not correspond to reality became especially evident through "youth culture" filmmaking. The hypocrisy that Petrushevskaia so masterfully depicts in her stories and which surrounded the average Soviet citizen's life became a stumbling stone in the effort to understand a generation and to combat the moral relativity that governed the youth life style in transitional Russian society.

The late 1980s produced quite a few youth-oriented feature films: *Pliumbum ili Opasnaia Igra* [Plumbum, or A Dangerous Game] (dir. V. Abdrashitov, 1987), *Kurier* [The Messenger Boy] (dir. K. Shakhnazarov, 1987), *Svoboda Eto Rai (SER)* [Freedom is Paradise] [*SER*] (dir. Sergey Bodrov Sr., 1989), *Igla* [The Needle] (dir. Rashid Nugmanov, 1988), *Podzhigateli* [The Arsonists] (dir. Alexander Surin, 1989), to name but a few. Those films concentrated largely on the mores and moral pitfalls of the "lost generation." They featured: a teenage-oriented urban drama of misplacement, identity crisis, and/or moral relativism, which replaced ideological constraints (*The Messenger Boy*; *Plumbum*); or harsh stories of teenage/youth violence and involvement with the criminal underworld (*The Arsonists*; *The Needle*); or the exploration of the social impact of the totalitarian system on the young generation (*SER*).

The second category of youth films in late Soviet, early post-Soviet cinema was the youth counter-culture film, which explored the Soviet rock-culture emerging from the underground and its profound impact on the young people. The examples of that tendency are: the documentary *Rock* (dir. Alexei Uchitel, 1988); feature films such as *Tragediia v Stile Rock* [Tragedy in Rock] (dir. Savva Kulish, 1988); *Vzlomshchik* [The Burglar] (dir. Valery Ogorodnikov, 1987). The most prominent film of this type is *ASSA* (1988) directed by Sergey Soloviev. It is a collage-like absurdist film, which juxtaposes the jovial and rebellious underground world of the counter-culture rock music and the corrupt culture of the decaying empire, represented by an aged mafia chief who looks like a party boss, suggesting the synonymy of these statuses.

Little Vera belongs to the first category of youth films, featuring a multi-faceted conflict, where the central focus is on fatal (literally) inter-generational misunderstandings, reemphasized in the chernukha thematics and aesthetics. I would like to approach the film from three perspectives: from that of the narrative strategies typical for chernukha; from the perspective of the descriptive text mode and from the perspective of visions of negative excess.[22]

a) Narrative Strategies

The narrative patterns common to all chernukha movies of the perestroika era are evidently present in *Little Vera* as well. Horton and Brashinsky define the distinguishing features of chernukha narrative as follows:

> The chernukha formula is at once simple and intricate. Its necessary ingredients are:
>
> 1. The family, agonizing or already collapsed.
> 2. Average Soviet citizens unmasking their animalistic nature, ultimate immorality, and unmotivated cruelty…
> 3. The death of all former ideals, leaving no hope for the future…
> 4. Packed everyday conditions in "communal apartments…"
> 5. Senseless hysterics and fights arising from nowhere and dying down in the middle of a scream.
> 6. Usually a few "adult" scenes (163-164).

Naturally, the forces that drive the plot development of chernukha films usually include violence (physical and verbal), sex (usually unromantic and lustful; prostitution; and rape or semi-rape) and crime (of all sorts, though, domestic and drug abuse, and street brawls [разборки] are more common).

Thus, in *Little Vera,* violence is manifested by the dysfunctional family, and by the street fights that Vera's friends are involved in. Sex obviously represents a driving force behind the whole plot. Sex is what Vera and her fiancé do best of all and sex seems to be the only thing that keeps them together. Despite Vera's recurrent question in the film: "Sergey, do you love me?" his answers do not seem to be quite honest as he echoes Vera's question with an air of irony: "Naturally" or "Of course." Criminality naturally comes into *Little Vera's* narrative world when the uncontrollable negative emotions pervade the screen and the mutual scorn of Vera's father and Sergey collide. The hint of class struggle is present here too: presumably, Sergey is a student, possibly from Moscow. He tells Vera's parents that his parents are in "fraternal Mongolia," while it is obvious he does not want his parents to meet Vera's blue-collar working class family: an alcoholic driver and an aging woman who embodies all possible stereotypical qualities of the Soviet wife (i.e. narrow-minded, obsessed with the household). The clash between the working class and intelligentsia will become a prominent theme in subsequent Perestroika movies (*Taxi Blues*, for example) as another taboo-breaking discursive practice. Chernukha promptly reflected the collapse of national myths: the idolized communist conscience of the nation – the proletariat – and the dissident messianic conscience of the nation – the intelligentsia – are both condemned as incapable of understanding and surviving in the harsh conditions of post-Soviet existence. A similar collapse of cultural statuses is present in Makanin's novel in the figure of Petrovich: a bum and an artist, a murderer and a martyr. The attention to class conflict is also reminiscent of natural school physiological traditions with a focus on social stratification.

In general, criticism on *Little Vera* concentrates specifically on the multi-faceted conflicts that assault the shattered Soviet value-system from many angles. There is obviously a generational conflict between Vera and her parents, the theme of troubled youth (see discussion of the film by Anna Lawton). There is also a gender-role conflict, pointed out by Horton and Brashinsky, who justifiably see many of Vera's troubles in her unwillingness to accept the role appointed to her of being her mother's double in the future. There is also a sexual conflict that is generation/culture and gender/peer based. The explicit sex scenes not only outraged the puritan Soviet public but also identified the film as a conflict-based challenge to the values of Soviet culture and of its pseudo-Puritanism which was based on denial. It is in Gorbachev's times that the infamous and semi-ironic phrase came into being: "There is no sex in the Soviet Union."[23] At the same time, Vera shows an ambiguous attitude towards the "youth's" definition of sex as entertainment or rebellion by rejecting her faithful admirer, Andrei, whom she does not love, and by persistently asking Sergey if he loves her. Besides the abundance of multi-layered conflicts, I would like to concentrate on the deviations in narrative strategies, the incoherencies and/or repetitions in the storyline and what understanding they might provide for analyzing chernukha in film.

Seymour Chatman argues that the text-types serve one another, meaning that they can be present in the same narrative and there can be a dominant text-type that shapes the nature of the narrative and affects it on the level of form and content, namely on the level of discourse and of the story. I argue that in the case of *Little Vera* and chernukha film in general the descriptive text-type simultaneously constitutes the formal mode of operation for chernukha texts and the source of its transgression into other styles and trends.

In *Little Vera* this description functions on different levels of narrative construction: on the levels of the plot and the story, on the level of character representation, on the level of formal features of setting and *mise-en-scene* and on the level of structure in general, which I will define as circular.

Little Vera's plot is conventional in the traditional sense of narrative as a:

> "way of organizing spatial and temporal data into a cause-and-effect chain of events with a beginning, middle, and end that embodies a judgment about the nature of the events as well as demonstrates how it is possible to know, and hence to narrate, the events" (Branigan, 3).

However, although it generally follows a logical progression, *Little Vera* shows a great deal of deviation from the traditional views on narrative.

[illegible] us take, for example, the beginning sequence of the film. There are three [illegible]al units in the beginning: home, the discotheque setting and the romantic setting. They provide the viewer with three separate spheres of Vera's life, commenting on the mores and attitudes in the provincial Soviet town, combining a meta-commentary and a personal story narration. Furthermore, similar to the narrative strategies of Makanin's omniscient narrator, the commentary pervades the narration in several instances.

Thus, the strange personage without a memorable name or a distinguished role in the narrative who provokes a fight at the discotheque and is the one to blame for the foreign currency in Vera's purse does not have a definite role in the story. He appears two more times in the film: once when he gets the booze for the party and once more when Vera comes to the police station to testify against Sergey. He is sitting at the neighboring desk, making Vera feel uncomfortable, equating her with criminal hooligans such as himself. This friend of Vera's obviously performs a symbolic function: he is a "type," a combination of marginal position, corrupt morality and criminal background, which the director introduces to give the viewer the taste of the life Vera is living outside her family. The "chain of events" in the beginning provides us with a background, with a description slipping into generalization, typical for physiological sketch, about the life of the Soviet youth.

The discotheque scene also strives for typicality and for descriptive quality, which is why for long periods of time it features, not Vera and people affiliated with her, but rather a random crowd. It concentrates on the poor decoration of the provincial disco and on the scene of the fight, when the police raid the discotheque, arriving in a wretched van that awkwardly falls down the entrance stairway. This description does not stop the story, but rather makes it deviate into domains that serve descriptive purposes and emphasize generalized qualities such as: "this is a typical dysfunctional Soviet family and this is how the Soviet youth, detached form all values and ideals of the past bides its time; this is how love is consummated and romance begins." Obviously, the text types are intertwined and argumentative commentary is connected with description. Those features are, of course, common to literary chernukha of the perestroika period, as I have demonstrated through the Astafiev's text, which inherits naturalism's interest in the typology of society and of mores (*Physiology of Petersburg*) and the ideological belief in the enlightening function of art.

And so Seymour Chatman argues that different text-types are subservient to each other. *Little Vera* proves it by featuring narrative subordinated to description, which, in turn, is reinforced by the argumentative text-type in the tradition of the natural school and the study of types as a means of exposure of social problems. The story comprises different digressions of a descriptive nature that demonstrate how the life of the youth in a provincial setting is a gloomy paradox. The paradox is such that Vera, her friends and people of the local milieu in general embody almost all anti-Soviet qualities one could ask for – they drink, have sex, do not care about their country or its ideology, fight until they incur grave penalties [*ugolovshchina*], and do not subscribe to any teleology of a "bright future." On the other side of this paradox is the fact that everything that comes into being in Vera's life is inherently Soviet, a day-to-day part of Soviet existence: crammed apartments, impoverished settings. The accusatory power of the generalization and depiction of the moral downfall of the younger generation, along with pictures of dysfunctional family life, heap scorn upon Soviet existence.

It is important to remember that, in the Soviet ideological discourse, family stood for the "cell of society" [iacheika obshchestva], a synecdoche for the social realm. It ironically continues to be so in chernukha art, the focus of which is on the destruction and failure of the family values. This paradox is manifested in ways that reject any positive or ideologically bound solutions, slipping into sheer negativity. The monstrous families of Petrushevskaia's fictional world are a literary example. In this respect, chernukha was an "Anti-Stroika" as Seth Graham puts it. Offering no hope for the future, chernukha provides a vision of a "black hole" (a term coined by Andrei Plakhov), refusing to subscribe to any teleological construct:

> Such utter pessimism, combined with the anti-verbal impulse and the complete fragmentation of the familial paradigm, all without any apparent authorial interpretation or clear motivation, indeed represents a rejection of the central perestroika-era strategy of presenting measured exposés of social problems, together with clearly implied or openly identified causes of those problems. (Graham, 15)

Little Vera is no exception to that dark paradigm and the viewer sees, as the plot unfolds, how everything collapses and violence increases: the attempted drunken murder; sexual harassment (Vera is assaulted by her boring admirer, Andrei, in the filthy hallway of an apartment building); the drunken attempted suicide; the brutal, hysterical "revival" of Vera by her brother (they fight and smash everything in the small kitchen); the death of Vera's father from the heart attack caused by all the misfortunes undergone by his family. No hope for the future is offered, as the end of the story is the lonely death of a man who cries for his children but is not heard. The reconciliation of lovers' scene in the end is ambiguous, as Sergey admits that he came back because he was scared but he is not able to respond to Vera's usual question about whether he loves her or not, the answer to which might have secured a future for the lovers.

Another important aspect of chernukha aesthetics in the film lies on the level of character development. Above, I stated that the "typage" structure concentrates on social description rather than psychological development, contrary to the realistic mode of the late Soviet cinema of the 1970s-1980s. In *Little Vera* the characters' psychological portraits strike the viewer as incomplete or poorly constructed. Thus, Sergey moves in with Vera and her parents for no reason whatsoever. In general, the majority of Sergey's actions appear within the narrative frame as obscure. His highly ironic tone suggests that he might be playing some sort of game, the origins or motivations behind which the viewer never learns. Sergey's return at the point of Vera's suicide calls forth more questions than answers. The most prevalent image of Sergey that is imprinted in the viewers' perception is that of his "macho qualities" (making love for example), he is more of a naked torso than the traditional representation of a lover, weighed down with emotions and attitudes. Therefore, his representation is contradictory to psychological realism, as it substitutes non-verbal representations of body image, spontaneous instincts and obscure behavioural models for verbal explanations.

The pattern of non-verbal representation is reinforced by Vera's image as well. Vera almost never talks; coherent dialogue and/or monologue are not essential parts of her representation on screen. She laughs, screams, makes faces, gesticulates, and performs different functions (such as that of a lover, or a daughter, helping around the household). The preference for bodily rather than verbal representation is a noted aspect of chernukha films (see Graham), which rely more on imagery and description rather than story-telling or psychological development. Bodily representation is traditional for literary chernukha as well, almost all authors use physiological detail, supporting the focus of the trend on obscenity.

Another part of this non-verbal paradigm is the inversion of the reliability of language: the "pluralism of opinion" (an essential part of the perestroika agenda) is inverted into an absence of opinion close to total loss of speech. That is why Vera, in the most climactic moments of the film, either utters drunk nonsense (as in the suicide scene) or laughs, or screams. The non-verbal appeal that chernukha projects through different discursive strategies (such as descriptive functions, digressions in plot, bodily representations) reach its peak in the formal style of chernukha art, specifically in *mise-en-scene* and framing.

The *mise-en-scene* in *Little Vera* reinforces the descriptive quality of chernukha. The first thing in the film that meets the eye is the extremely crowded frame: people have a hard time fitting into the onscreen space. The most common angle in the whole film is the straight angle, but the camera is positioned in the narrow hall (corridor) of the apartment of Vera's parents, which faces the tiny kitchen. The visible walls of the corridor on the sides of the frame create further limitations of the onscreen space and reinforce the feeling of suffocation and claustrophobia. The majority of communication occurs in the kitchen (referring to the famous "kitchen dissident culture" as the most habitual space in the life of a Soviet citizen). Everybody who manages to fit in the kitchen barely fits in the frame, coming into view from the narrow passage of the hall. That is why, while watching *Little Vera*, the viewer is constantly struck by a feeling of claustrophobia or overcrowding, thronging [*davka*], an extreme lack of space. Even when the camera does not focus on the kitchen space, the choice of distance is such that the film is shot with a considerable amount of "crowded" close-ups, when the faces of the characters are almost falling off the screen, or crowded group shots, such as at Andrei's party. The film favours medium shots or medium close-ups.[24] In addition to those choices, the space in the film is generally over occupied. Even with the long shots of the fighting crowd or the interrogation scene, the *mise-en-scene* is crowded with objects and people: such is the case when Vera testifies against Sergey, squeezed between the police officers' two desks in the small room.

The constant lack of space and feeling of suffocation is obviously created consciously with an attempt at realism, which is, however, more of a guise. The realism of the "throng" comes from the infamously crowded public transportation, ubiquitous lines for products, extremely small spaces in which to accommodate people – Vera's apartment is an accurate historic representation of Soviet and contemporary Russian living conditions. However, being a parodic, but not humorous reconstruction of the Soviet private/public spaces, the film reflects more than just a statement of the fact that Soviet living conditions are terrible. This statement proves true when one compares the ways the same Soviet typical apartment was shot in the Soviet-era productions and chernukha of the perestroika period films. In the Soviet films the panoramic shot of the apartment allowed to produce an illusion of more spatial quarters (the typical example is the Oscar-winning cult film of the 1980s *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (dir. Vladimir Menshov). However, in a film such as *Little Vera* the living space is deliberately narrowed by the means of the camera angle and framing.

The abundance of body language and the numbers of those bodies crowding the frame was perceived by some critics[25] as the manifestation of a vital impulse, capable of revitalizing the stagnating empire, as the manifestation of the positive instinctual and bestial origins of human nature. However, I think that *Little Vera* does not manifest a new paradigm for "beautiful savages" or any other Nietzschean constructs that are now embodied in blue-collar provincial alcoholic families. There is a certain clash between the visual excess of the bodies and faces in the narrow space and the broken line of communication between the people in this space. I think that the visual appeal of the crowded frame and the body language centers the cinematic text on the descriptive mode of negative (anti-communicational) excess.

There is obviously a subversion of the "kitchen cult" with its brotherhood of dissidence that occurs in the film. Svetlana Boym in her study *Common Places* notes that alternative "kitchen culture:" emerged in the late 1960s in the Soviet Union was similar to salon culture, kitchens have become equivalent of salons, but with a friendly touch of informality and intimacy. They became places of intellectual discussions and dissident interaction. In *Little Vera,* what used to be the sole place of freedom of speech becomes the doldrums of all verbosity and communication. Boym notes that there was also a communal apartment kitchen in the Soviet everyday mythology, which represents a place of forced communality and hostile communication. It seems like *Little Vera* realizes the agenda of the communal kitchen culture more suitable for the proletariat rather than the romanticized kitchen salon of intelligentsia.

Both the communal kitchen (the place where common interests collide) and the kitchen salon (the place where common interests join) represent a central topos in the space of the Soviet home. Thus, all important events in the film happen in the kitchen. Vera's parents shout at each other and at Vera in the kitchen; it is in the kitchen that Vera decides to commit suicide after a lonely hysteric fit, it is in the kitchen that Vera's father stabs Sergey. The kitchen in Vera's apartment serves as a setting and background for perpetuating conflict and depression. It is a culturally weighed background that reinforces the descriptive power of the negative vision.

The descriptive background is important in another chernukha production, *Friend of the Deceased* (dir. Vyacheslav Krishtofovich, Ukraine, 1997). In that film the background setting is a lonely desk with a broken phone tied over with duct tape, so one can't pick up the receiver but has to talk sort of in a void, hearing the voice coming out of the machine and talking into empty air. The recurrent image of the main character sitting at the desk or talking over the phone in such a strange manner is another example of how the setting reinforces the descriptive visual imagery and inscribes the notion of hopeless communicational breakdown.

Other important descriptive devices also present in *Little Vera* are the sequences that belong only in discourse time, not narrative time. The most prominent of these sequences are, of course, the introductory and concluding extreme long shots of panoramic quality that display the industrial city: the smoke of the factory chimneys, the devastated landscape in the foreground and the identical houses crammed together in the background. The industrial imagery is very strong in *Little Vera*. It is pervasive in the "beach scene," when we see the happy youngsters enjoying sunbathing in an industrial wasteland; it is pervasive in the episode when Vera becomes drunk and rejects Andrei on some sort of abandoned, rotting ship that harmoniously fits together with the piles of metal junk around it. Chernukha is mostly an urban "genre," (just like *film noir*) featuring the contemporary Russian urban settings as an environment of despair and alienation.

A portrait of the ordinary Soviet city (and that is again a very realistic description) is combined with apocalyptic imagery of the city of doom. The film's visual representation constantly switches between the ordinary and the apocalyptic, inscribing some sort of hellish nature into Soviet daily occurrences. A similar device is used by Petrushevskaia, who juxtaposes daily routine with the abject matters of death, suffering and violence. A good example of the combination of ordinary and apocalyptic in the film is the recurring image of the train that occasionally passes by Vera's house. In one shot, the dark, loud train is even juxtaposed with a child who is playing, reinforcing the contrast and the coexistence of the quotidian and the apocalyptic. The inanimate, industrial objects are shapeless and purposeless; they intrude and coexist with humans on the same crowded terrain. The special hellish effect is compounded by smoke imagery, which is not as strong in *Little Vera* (i.e. it appears only once, as flames coming out of the locomotive, though it appears at the climactic moment of Vera's suicide and Sergey's return, shortly followed by the death of Vera's father). However, in various other chernukha films smoke and fire will play a crucial part in creating the image of the "city of doom" and hellish nightmares (see *Taxi Blues* for examples in this chapter later on).

It is no coincidence that *Little Vera* starts and ends with the same image. The recurrence of images, the repetitive patterns of visual representations constitute a circular structure of the film. The train that comes by Vera's house projects the idea of return and repetition. It is not explicitly stated, but the majority of intra-municipal industrial trains circulate between different factories to deliver the production components, remove waste and transport finished products. However, even regardless of the knowledge of the structure of small industrial cities, the visual patterns repeat themselves in *Little Vera*: the image of the train persistently returns and the panoramic view gives a perspective of the amorphous reality of the provincial environment. The kitchen, as the static battlefield of the omnipresent conflict also adds to the repetitive structure of the film.

The repetitive patterns that are mainly stylistic *mise-en-scene* structures are astonishingly prominent in all chernukha films – I have yet to see one that does not employ repetitive patterns. Therefore, patterns must create a special vision incorporated into those films. Thus, in *Friend of the Deceased,* the repetitive structure in this film functions, as mentioned above, through the recurrent image of a broken telephone, when the protagonist, after each adventure, more horrifying and disgraceful than the last, returns home and perpetually finds the same setting with the broken phone on the desk. The desk stands by the window from which the church's bright domes are seen, the image of possibly close, but ultimately unattainable redemption. The character's adventures alternate in setting between his apartment, the café and the shop. They constitute a vicious circle in which he is trapped. That repetitive structure amplifies the visual images that reinforce the depressing mood of the film (the broken phone in the empty apartment; the shop as a post-Soviet symbol of unattainable riches; the bohemian café burnt to the ground after the murder – the result of the protagonist's flawed decisions).

The repetition in chernukha films does not seem to fit the metonymic repetition theorized by Riffaterre, which I have discussed in the previous chapter. The intensification and amplification of the depressing atmosphere achieved through repetition more likely corresponds to the notion of repetition developed by Søren Kierkegaard in his short essay *Repetition*. The story that Kierkegaard tells is quite entertaining: a philosopher is trying to establish the possibility of repetition as a new sensibility of the Modern age. After few unsuccessful attempts the unfortunate philosopher encounters a young man, the young man suffers from an unhappy love affair and escapes to Berlin (exactly what Kierkegaard did). From Berlin he writes to the philosopher about the fact that he has understood the real meaning of repetition. After his former fiancée married another man, the young man compares himself to Job, who was deprived of everything but everything was returned to him in double. That is a real repetition states the young man.

The story is highly allegorical and weighed with personal experience, so I do not attempt to analyze it fully here. The important point for me is that repetition is essentially the same thing (the young man regained his self and was forgiven, similar to Job, for example) but that which returns as altered in quantity, thus Job regained "double." Could it be that chernukha uses repetition that alternates directions: instead of a "return in double" the repetition in chernukha provides a doubling in negativity, returning nothing or even worse than nothing?

Thus, in *Little Vera* the industrial landscape returns in the end of the film when the viewer is already aware of all horrible things that happened in that city. The image of the train first comes during the day, passing the playground with a child, it represents a removed menace, a storm crow. The return of the image comes at the climactic moment of Vera's suicide at night in smoke: it is a "double" value of negativity. By the same token the protagonist of *Friend of the Deceased* returns to the same image of the phone, his situation is getting worse and worse, putting him on the edge of insanity, this is a "double," too. Therefore, chernukha in film uses repetition as a strategy of negative return, the repetition that excessively withdraws and deprives rather than rewards, even if the mechanism of its function is similar to the poetic concept by Kierkegaard.

Thus, *Little Vera,* being a chernukha film, possesses certain features that are not discussed in the usual critical assessment of the chernukha art of the perestroika era. Apart from well-known guidelines for chernukha film analysis, such as the negative appropriation of the Soviet past and/or daily life, the taboo-breaking discourse that exposes societal evils, there are also certain aspects of the phenomenon that bring forward its transgressive nature in terms of style and visual representations. Those aspects are: the dominant descriptive text-type that emphasizes the setting and background of the *mise-en-scene* rather than the story, accents that shift from the story to the dimension of discourse; the descriptive elements that function within a repetitive (circular) structure, creating an excessively negative (black or dark) vision.

2. Chernukha and High Art: *Taxi Blues* and *The Second Circle.*

Taxi Blues (dir. Pavel Loungine, 1990) was the second Perestroika feature film acclaimed not only in Russia but also in the West. Unlike *Little Vera*, which came as a shock to the Soviet audience and was an eye-opener to the Western public regarding the advances of Glasnost in the Soviet Union, *Taxi Blues* was recognized as a director's achievement and awarded the *Palm d'Or* at the Cannes film festival. Of course, winning an award at the Cannes film festival does not automatically put *Taxi Blues* into the vast and often vague category of *auteur cinema*. However, it correctly indicates the inclination of Loungine's story towards an ambiguous representation of cultural conventions within the framework that defined the borders between high and low subject matter that was especially rigid in the Soviet Union.

Because Soviet cinema virtually did not know the genre film, or any mainstream that would produce something outside the Socialist Realist paradigm, the directors were put in a dubious situation from the start, either to make a "high culture" production, which would mean to claim the status of dissidence, or to subscribe to the Socialist Realist Canon. At the same time, there were a limited number of directors that fit neither category (for example, Tatiana Lianozova, the author of huge detective hit *The Seventeen Moments of Spring*); a tradition that Loungine continues. As pointed out by Russian critics (Lavrentiev, Shepotinnik in *Russian Critics on the Cinema of Glasnost*), *Taxi Blues* stands on a crossroads, blending the ideological implications of "high art" with generic construction and Hollywood dynamism. That mix was either condemned for not being "artistic" enough (Shepotinnik) or praised for reinvigorating a Soviet cinema beset by "provincialism" (Lavrentiev). A similar ambiguous position is present in Makanin's novel, which mixes chernukha "low" content with an intellectual, stylistically elaborate novel and intertextual play with the Russian literary tradition.

The traces of genre in *Taxi Blues* were pointed out by several critics (Horton & Brashinsky, Seth Graham). The former classify *Taxi Blues* as a "buddy film," while Graham sees it as more of a Western. Both authors, however, admit that the generic conventions are either incomplete or subverted by the film.

> Loungine alters this American grammar for Russian purposes. Whereas the American buddy film...depicts opposites who come to appreciate each other and work together.., *Taxi Blues* offers no such easy sense of growth, maturity or acceptance...True to chernukha's basic negative aesthetic, *Taxi Blues* highlights the unbridgeable gap between the two men. (Horton & Brashinsky, 166)

Another important point is the influence of *Taxi Driver* by Martin Scorsese, suggested by the title *Taxi Blues.* As Horton and Brashinsky argue, *Taxi Blues* shares the same dark vision of contemporary urban culture as much as it touches upon social problems (the De Niro character is a former Vietnam veteran) and presents a pessimistic story in a dynamic and aggressive fashion.

Taxi Blues takes links and allusions to Western cinema and reconfigures them within a specifically Russian context. This context embraces certain aspects of pre-Soviet and post-Soviet culture, exploring an essential issue in Russia, that of class difference. The storyline of Loungine's film is composed of different twists in the love/hate relationship between the alcoholic bohemian saxophone player Lesha, and the redneck taxi-driver Shlykov. The intelligentsia and proletariat meet again, but this time in the confusing transitional period that in some respects reverses the roles and in some respects reaffirms traditional conceptions. Again, there are obvious parallels to the novel by Makanin, whose protagonist embodies contradictory images of dissidence and marginality, and whose troubled life in the times of perestroika also presents the mirroring and inversion of traditional roles and stereotypes (see the discussion of Petrovich's ambivalent status in Chapter I).

Thus, Loungine's film presents a blend of genre conventions, allusions to Western cinema, metaphysical implications within the story and chernukha aesthetics (or anti-aesthetics, as Graham has suggested). The reason I distinguish *Taxi Blues* from "mainstream" chernukha such as *Little Vera* or *Friend of the Deceased* is the ambivalent status of *Taxi Blues*, the multiplicity of incorporated elements, which determine the difficulty of defining it. By arguing that *Taxi Blues* is a chernukha film, I would like simultaneously to expand the limits in which chernukha is perceived and obtain a clearer perspective on the applications and limitations of the chernukha art mode. To expand the focus on "non-typical" chernukha productions and unexplored definitions of chernukha art, I will also include a brief analysis of Alexander Sokurov's film *The Second Circle* (1990) in this chapter. I chose Sokurov's work because it most exemplifies what is called *auteur cinema* on the contemporary Russian cinematographic scene; furthermore, it might provide insights into how the chernukha mode is adapted to high culture products. There are other films that can be used to illustrate those points, such as the films of Kira Muratova or some of the recent works by Alexei German.

Unlike Horton and Brashinsky, who see chernukha solely as a responsive discourse, which emerged with the lifting of Soviet taboos, Graham acknowledges the "legacy of chernukha" and the influence of the "artistic mode" on *auteur* and genre cinema. What I would like to focus on is establishing conceptual definitions for the chernukha mode in terms, not of influence or legacy, but rather of its persistent presence and formal adaptability within Russian culture. *Taxi Blues* and *The Second Circle* are the means by which to establish those notions. The questions I am interested in are: what makes *Taxi Blues* chernukha? How does chernukha manifest itself within the stylistic and narrative structure of the film? And, finally, what differences and similarities could be found between *Taxi Blues* and *Little Vera* that would prove the transgressive nature of the artistic mode?

a) The Narrative Dualism and Ambivalence

As I have mentioned above, *Taxi Blues,* through the dualism of the two contrasting characters, treats one of the most controversial issues in Russian cultural history, that of class relationship and the interaction between the intelligentsia and proletariat – between the upper-class educated elite and lower-class working masses. *Taxi Blues* exploits the mythologies of collective imagination about the contentious relationship between the intelligentsia and the proletariat instead of developing a new vision on that issue. Svetlana Boym, referring to Roland Barthes' concept of myth, defines cultural mythologies as "cultural common places, recurrent narratives that are perceived as natural" (4) while behind a common place there is a constructed socio-political discourse.

That discourse is a complex one, just like the love/hate relationship of the two protagonists. Just as the working class was idealized in the utopian discourse in nineteenth-century Russia, by the same token the coercive domination of the proletariat in twentieth-century Soviet Russia gave birth to a dissident attitude of despising and fearing the proletariat, considering it to be *bydlo* (a disdainful colloquial Russian expression indicating aggressive narrow-mindedness and lack of "culture," elevated morals and education). What is important to keep in mind is that common myths about class difference are not an objective description of social statuses but rather a privileged construct used by one social group to explain and/or justify its attitudes towards other social groups, establishing a hierarchy of knowledge and power (cultural as much as political).[26]

The film presents two contrasting characters in the forms of the down-to-earth, arrogant and manipulative working class taxi driver and an artist, alcoholic and psychologically troubled, but nonetheless, as he claims, capable of "talking to God" with his saxophone. The film shows the two contrasting worlds of Shlykov and Lesha that rarely meet and inevitably collide with tragic repercussions.

Taxi Blues introduces the class issue from the first shots of the film, when we see the taxi racing along the nocturnal Moscow streets with drunken Lesha and his friends, and in contrast, the gloomy driver who refuses to respond to questions put forth by the bohemian crowd in his vehicle. Their questions sound friendly but condescending, the same type of conversation is described in Liudmila Petrushevskaia's *Our Crowd*, when the police officer is regarded by the assembled guests as some wondrous beast and is interrogated in a friendly manner about "how people like that live." However, it is working-class Shlykov who masters the alcoholic, neurotic Lesha, justifying that enslavement as the desire to "make a man" out of Lesha [*muzhika sdelat*]. That means to teach him a lesson about what real work and the real world are. It is Shlykov who exercises all the physical violence in the film, from the beginning, when he expropriates Lesha's saxophone, to the chase at the end. However, it is Lesha who eventually leaves Shlykov miserable and confused about his life.

The dualism of the two worlds to which those classes belong is complemented by the dualism of dependency: if Lesha is physically dependent on Shlykov, then Shlykov depends on Lesha's friendship and affection for moral reasons. However, that friendship appears to be a fatal attraction as the depressing ending shows. Regarding the common stereotypes of class antagonism, the film probably favours Lesha, stressing the metaphor of genius versus mediocrity. Loungine shows the working class hero, against the grain of the Socialist Realist canon, as violent (he beats up, not only Lesha, who presumably deserved it, but also some teenagers who just look "odd," having long hair, etc.); manipulative and pedantic in his views (Shlykov tries to teach Lesha how one should live); narrow-minded and uncultured, adhering to violence and physical strength as the signs of manhood (Shlykov is a former wrestling champion, he is shown twice working out on a homemade weight machine). On top of the class issues there are also connotations to the "Jewish question," because Lesha is a Jew, however, the film does not provide many explicit connotations of anti-Semitism and Russian chauvinism, which will become the ideological basis for Loungine's next film, *Luna Park* (1992).

Subverting the Socialist Realist canonized image of the working class, Loungine, however, does not offer anything specifically new or unknown to dissident Soviet art. The canonical myths about the working class were subverted in conceptual art (Komar and Melamid, Vladimir Sorokin) and in the dissident literature of various trends (Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Iosif Brodsky, Sasha Sokolov). As much as the nineteenth-century legacy of the "sacred" mission of the intelligentsia to enlighten and educate was negated by dissident literature (see the article-manifesto by Viktor Erofeev, *Soviet Literature: in Memoriam*).

Thus, Loungine subscribes to the dissident outlook, introducing a negative vision of the working class hero and at the same time depicting the intelligentsia hero as a genius incapable of taking care of himself (not to mention enlightening others), an alcoholic ready to sell his soul for booze, and who ends up in a psychiatric ward. Lesha, however, inspires unusual emotions and interests within Shlykov. Loungine implicitly suggests that it is the world of the elite, no matter how perverse, is the object of desire and envy for the lower classes, and, ergo, the essence of the class struggle.

The double model of two worlds that do not intersect or penetrate each other is suggested in the juxtaposition of contrasting settings and scenes. One of the most important episodes is the one that features Shlykov looking for Lesha in the "House of Culture," *Dom Kultury* (an institutionalised club in Soviet times). Here Shlykov enters the long, narrow, bright corridor – the passage to the main offices. The narrow hallway is filled with strange people, who remind the viewer of an artistic, playful, carnivalesque atmosphere, somewhat *a la* Fellini: there are gymnasts, magicians, some dancing ballerinas, practicing musicians, etc. Shlykov's confusion indicates that he does not belong here, in the "upper" world and at the same time the scene connotes archaic notions of rites of passage (such as initiation): it is clear that Shlykov is about to encounter something or somebody that will change his life – he finds Lesha. This motif of the passage to the other world that drastically changes the protagonist's perspective or somehow shatters it is also repeated in *Luna Park*, when the neo-nazi, ultra-nationalist Russian male protagonist goes to the Municipal Marriage Office, where he makes his way through the long, narrow hall filled with happy newlyweds and their guests singing and dancing, only to find out that he is of Jewish descent.

The other significant aspect of the dualist nature of the world is the presentation of the space that Shlykov's inhabits: his apartment; the store where his girlfriend is a manager; the taxi park; the friends to whom he takes the saxophone to be appraised. The film features all these places in a series of sequences, the majority of which take place before the "passage scene," serving the purpose of an introduction to and description of Shlykov's daily social milieu and environment. Thus, we see Shlykov in his communal apartment which, in the best chernukha traditions, is cramped, old and cluttered with objects that indicate the painful nature of Soviet existence in which there is no comfort and everything falls apart. To notice these details, one has to pay attention to the lighting in the rooms, which is usually a bare light bulb hanging on a wire; the taps and sinks, the restroom; the halls and doorways – they are all usually narrow and full of junk. The walls and ceilings are normally stained and mouldy as a result of leaking pipes. Thus, the apartment in chernukha films is mainly a manifestation of malfunction and decay on the literal and on the metaphorical levels.

Shlykov's apartment displays most of the details that I have mentioned above. Furthermore, the store in which he comes to see his girlfriend and where he seems to feel at home is presented as a butcher's shop (it is probably a store specializing in meat), the meat, blood and axes seem to dominate the scenery, the store's facilities, again, are dirty and evoke the atmosphere of a typical Soviet shop, in which everything gets distributed within the closed, privileged circle of employees and their friends before it gets to the customer. There are a few allusions to this culture of *blat* [string pulling], first in the store, then later on when Shlykov's girlfriend brings an expensive fish to the party.

The most important juxtaposition of the two worlds, in my view, is shown in the two love scenes (I should probably put *love* in quotation marks): first one between Lesha and his ex-wife and the second one between Shlykov and his girlfriend, Ira. Both episodes blend sex and violence, a rather typical combination for chernukha aesthetics. In the first love scene, Lesha comes to his ex-wife in search of some medicine, which is either for relieving his hangover or, more likely, some sort of illicit drug that his wife warns him not to take. Lesha breaks into his own apartment (which is clean and bright, with books and flowers), fights with his wife (however, he does not beat or abuse her) and locks her in the bathroom. After he gets his medicine and calms down, he and the wife have a tender romantic scene in the bathtub, where she decides to take a bath while she is locked up (this funny detail indicates that she does not take the scandal seriously or that her feelings for Lesha outweigh the fact of abuse).

In contrast, the next love scene is usually cited as the darkest chernukha moment of the film (Horton and Brashinsky). Shlykov invites Ira over for dinner, at which Lesha is also present, and Shlykov forces Lesha to play the saxophone. While Lesha plays popular, simple melodies, Shlykov and Ira dance and seem to enjoy each other's company, but when Lesha begins playing more sophisticated music and starts improvising, Ira abandons Shlykov and becomes fascinated by the music, dancing with Lesha. Shlykov, in a fit of jealousy, smashes the saxophone. He and Lesha fight, practically destroying the room, until Lesha leaves. Ira tries to clean up the mess, complaining about Shlykov's nasty character. When she leans out of the window, Shlykov copulates with her, first repressing her resistance and fear (she is almost falling out of the window), then she enjoys it, recognizing his power.

In both scenes sex is preceded by violence, however, in Shlykov's case, sex starts with violence as well; sex is depicted as animalistic and unnatural. The visual appeal of the second scene is much stronger than the narrative development, it again reminds us of the high descriptive quality of chernukha. Shlykov copulates with Ira in a completely ruined room, the floor of which is littered with Styrofoam that gets stuck in Ira's shoes. Shlykov forcefully grabs Ira and presses her body against the windowsill. In the frame the viewer only sees Ira's thrashing legs, and her convulsions make the viewer suspect that her lover might actually be suffocating her, if not for Shlykov's naked buttocks.

Both scenes emphasize the antagonism between the main characters, accentuating their worlds as totally incompatible with and impenetrable to each other. Another chernukha characteristic that is notorious in *Taxi Blues* is the communicational breakdown that is the result of the dualism explicitly manifested throughout the film. As I have shown in my analysis of *Little Vera,* the misunderstanding that boarders upon muteness is one of the prominent features of chernukha film. Going back to negativity in conjunction with non-verbal appeal, I argue that chernukha manifests itself as a communicational gap and dysfunction of language.

In some ways chernukha does a disservice to the ideological background of *Taxi Blues*, because it creates empty space devoid of language, producing ambivalence within the narrative frame that strives for conventionality (in terms of genre appropriations) and intertextuality (in terms of reference to the history of class antagonism within Russian culture). As mentioned above, *Taxi Blues* does not maintain the purity of the genres that originated in the West. Rather, it adopts some elements (dynamism, action driven plot), but rejects the major conventions such as coherency of characters' actions, an affirmative ending etc.

The ideological implications of *Taxi Blues* that captures the attention of Russian film critics and claims to be "high art" are very suggestive of the dissident discourse about the proletariat and intelligentsia. However, the film itself rarely features an elaborate historic dialogue, i.e. the stereotypes and images are obviously recognizable but the dualism in the film does not interact with the cultural context. Rather, this radical dualism manifests those worlds from radically divergent perspectives, neither of which is comprehensive in terms of the historical or cultural context of class relations. The same ideological subversion happened in Astafiev's novella, when the explicitly stated Slavophil ideas faded away from the negative energy of chernukha's artistic mode of intensified obscene style.

For example, consider the following dialogue, which takes place shortly after Lesha has his nervous fit. In this dialogue there occurs a unique instance where the word *chernukha* is uttered as a description of what Shlykov understands as a state of depression and hopeless despair. Shlykov makes Lesha a "vitaminized" healthy breakfast, Lesha is indifferent and attempts to lie down with his face turned to the wall several times, but Shlykov does not let him, explaining:

> *Shlykov*: Chernukha (*translated in subtitles as the black hole*)! I'll show you. Look, do this, I'll snap you out of it! (*Shows Lesha a breathing musculatory movement, close-up on the unnaturally moving belly*) No help? Do this 10 times! *(Gets on the floor and energetically does push ups, counting)* Chase chernukha away! Still doesn't work? Do 20 more, do it like I do!
> *Lesha*: Vanya, listen to me: you are such an asshole, you really are… *(Turns to the wall, Shlykov laughs saying "Yes").*

This passage indicates the communicational gap between the two men: when Shlykov *really* cares and tries to help, Lesha thinks he is manipulating and torturing him. The antagonism between classes means negative interaction, grounds for misunderstanding, while *Taxi Blues* offers the absence of any interaction, or any ground for (mis)understanding. The characters, having been brought together, could not survive the challenge of being together due to the semiotic disruption between their worlds, i.e. the absence of a common language with which they could speak and understand each other, the prevalence of chernukha.

It is interesting to note that media clichés are presented in the film as stable discursive structures that serve as a comprehensive but hollow and meaningless language.

They are presented when the film features the big-screen televisions in public places, similar to those in Times Square, New York.[27] Specifically, we see Lesha, giving an interview in New York, displayed on the big-screen television on the street and Shlykov, bewildered and betrayed, watching. Here the cultural inscription of Lesha being recognized as a genius and a star is expressed by meaningless language that does not reflect the true state of affairs. The true state of affairs is Lesha's perverse relationship with Shlykov and his disturbed personality (the finale in the psychiatric ward). As viewers, we do not witness the stardom or special powers of Lesha's genius, but rather we only see him in the most disgraceful moments (while drunk, hung over, depressed). The actual moments of divine inspiration are few and are followed by some special cruelty or depressing scene (a love scene, for example).

Therefore, the semiotic constructions around the lives of the protagonists, such as class ideology or social status of friendship, fail because those constructions are empty and meaningless. They are replaced by the all-absorbing negativity of the chernukha style that is specifically characterized by a non-verbal, anti-representational appeal, signified by a communicational break-down that destroys all comprehensive efforts towards establishing coherency and a common ground for signification.

The understanding of chernukha as an art mode manifested primarily in non-verbal, anti-representational constructions brings up the point discussed previously with regards to *Little Vera*. Namely, that chernukha is primarily a descriptive textual mode, with descriptive emphasis as opposed to narrative structure or verbal medium accents, which allows it to transgress different styles, genres and trends. I will briefly describe the descriptive powers of chernukha in *Taxi Blues* and compare it to Alexander Sokurov's *The Second Circle.*

b) Descriptive Mode and Circular Structure in *Taxi Blues* and in the *Second Circle.*

In *Taxi Blues* the visual settings create a pervasive aesthetics of chernukha. Just as in *Little Vera,* the description of the daily surroundings is of extreme importance. For example, the "love scene" mentioned above produces such a negative, nauseating effect precisely because of the visual impact and the backdrop specific to chernukha: the messy room, pieces of Styrofoam on the floor, the darkness and the poverty of Shlykov's apartment.

The communal apartment settings also play a prominent role. When we see Lesha having a fit, the camera with the high-angle shows only his pale, naked legs (a naturalistic disclosure) against the background of the bare and unclean Soviet-style bathroom. The introduction of Shlykov also happens in the descriptive mode, when we see him at the butcher's, then at some sort of bazaar located in a large landfill. The first meeting with Shlykov is in his own apartment, when we follow Shlykov and his neighbour through the dark, narrow, twisted halls (that introductory structure echoes the one in *Little Vera*). Svetlana Boym, discussing the specific topos of communal apartments, notes that a communal apartment is a forceful communality and violent collectivism. In *Taxi Blues* Shlykov's communal apartment is a site of violence performed on Lesha, just like the kitchen in *Little Vera* becomes a site of violence, because it is common space, a site of Soviet communality. The domination of descriptive text-type in *Taxi Blues* is of the same character as that discussed in *Little Vera*, when the description transcends the boundaries of the narration, creating a special artistic mode: the mode of chernukha.

In the same vein in *Taxi Blues,* the auditory and visual images that are part of the non-verbal aspects do not necessarily come into the text as background or description but rather as a visual or auditory trope (metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche). They create certain types of ensembles, recurring in a consistent fashion and conveying a narrative message. Christian Metz, in *The Imaginary Signifier,* notes that metonymy, being a privileged mode of cinematic language (the contiguity relationship), is indistinguishably intertwined with metaphor (a relationship of similarity) and synecdoche (where a part stands for the whole) – all these tropes can combine with or transform into each other.

Thus, in *Taxi Blues,* the red colour is charged with a symbolic investment: it is the colour of Lesha's favourite shirt (metonymy), which stands for freedom and liberal values, embodied in a bright unique image that Shlykov lacks (a metaphoric relationship). It is important to remember that red in ancient Russian means "beautiful" and was traditionally a colour of holidays, parties and public events (like going to church). Lesha is a genius saxophone player, his shirt metonymically represent the joy one receives from art, the joy that is unattainable to Shlykov. By the end of the film Shlykov cries at Lesha's concert and violently rejects the company of his girlfriend and her colleagues with their primitive entertainment and drunken singing. Thus, in the end, we learn that Shlykov bought himself a red Mercedes. It is a red car that Shlykov chases at the end of the film in a desperate attempt to find and punish Lesha. In short, red stands for that which is unattainable but desirable.

Another element of symbolic investment into red is derived from the cultural and historic connotations: red being the official colour of the Soviet Union, therefore, it also functions as an emblematic reference (a well-known index). In the beginning of the film the taxi drives around streets of holiday Moscow, which is festooned with red flags, fireworks and inundated by crowds of people. Red, therefore, stands for official, collective celebration. Lesha, in his red shirt, presents the opposite of the Soviet collective ideology – an individualistic way of celebrating. Furthermore, the statement "I want a party" [*prazdnika khochetsia*] is uttered on several occasions. Firstly by Lesha, who drags Shlykov across Moscow with promises of payment and then by Ira, when she explains to Shlykov how she got "seduced" by the saxophone. Again a celebration, a party, the joy of living is unattainable for Shlykov, an ordinary Soviet citizen tired of official, forced merriment. However, the concept of celebration also bears the ambivalent nature of mixed connotations: red as the representation of an official celebration or a personal holiday. Red might already be an empty sign of hollow official language or a subtle warning of the menacing presence of ideology in personal lives. In both cases it is charged with ambivalent opinions towards the Soviet past. Red emphasizes the main focus of *Taxi Blues*: the ambiguous relationship between the two characters in the uncertain conditions of the transitional period.

Sound also plays an important role in *Taxi Blues*. The sound of the saxophone (diegetic and non-diegetic) and the sound of the television (diegetic sound) function as additional descriptive devices. Linguistic dysfunction is compensated for by the increased importance of sound.[28] Thus, in the episode when Lesha visits Shlykov for the last time in the story, Lesha storms into the apartment with a crowd of giggling, drunk, dressed-up friends and presents Shlykov with a rubber sex doll. The humiliation of the moment is obvious: everybody laughs at Shlykov, he, in turn, realizes the pointlessness of having awaited Lesha's arrival, of his hopes for friendship and of his tears at Lesha's concert.

Right before this scene and shortly after Lesha and his crowd leave, we see Shlykov, looking frustrated and tired, sitting in front of his television. We do not see much of the image on the television, but we hear the soundtrack of some Western or South Asian martial arts film dubbed into Russian. Thus, the sound of the television serves as an auditory metaphor for Shlykov's wrath and frustration, substituting descriptive sound exemplification for narrative action. Moreover, the auditory or visual rhetoric devices are additional means to demonstrate, firstly, the descriptive mode, which prevails in chernukha aesthetics and, secondly, the non-verbal appeal that chernukha holds due to its inherent quality of linguistic and communicational disruption.

In addition, the scene mentioned above is intertextually related to Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* – specifically the episode in which Travis (the protagonist) is watching a melodrama and slowly tips the television over until it smashes on the floor. The two scenes show the same intention to describe the main character's psychological frustration, the communicational gap that exists between him and the outside world, as well as the failure of "culture" to fill in that gap and inscribe meaning into Travis' world. The sound of fighting coming from Shlykov's TV projects his aggressive frustration as well as his loneliness; the melodrama lines that come from Travis' TV project his love frustrations. In both cases just like the media language of the televisions set up in public places, the

TV sound implies the meaninglessness of an empty sign unable to console both characters and instead inspires their aggression.

The last point I would like to touch upon with regards to *Taxi Blues* is the narrative structure of the film. As I have noted above in my analysis of *Little Vera*, the circular structure, which emphasizes visual patterns and repetitive elements along with other aspects, creates an excessive mode of discursive presentation specific to chernukha. In *Taxi Blues* the circular structure is manifested through repetitive patterns, such as Shlykov's "workout," which takes place at the beginning before he gets into the messy relationship with Lesha and shortly after Lesha is gone for good. I have mentioned the episode where Shlykov attempts to convince Lesha to exercise in order to get the "chernukha" out, but working out as a panacea against depression and betrayal does not work. According to the rules of chernukha repetition, the return is always negative multiplied by two. If the first workout scene happens when he gets cheated financially, the second workout episode is when Shlykov is cheated much more intimately with his expectations of friendship and understanding ruined and his feelings hurt.

The circular image that opens and closes the film is smoke: in the beginning it is smoke from some unknown source rising up above nocturnal Moscow (maybe a warning of the dangerous ride the protagonists are about to take). At the end it is the fire and smoke rising from the crashed cars (again the negativity is doubled). In *Little Vera* smoke and fire are the attributes of the industrial landscape suggesting the image of the "hellish city" with apocalyptic connotations that are very appropriate for the chernukha style.

The smoke in the beginning of *Taxi Blues* alludes to *Taxi Driver*, i.e. the noir-like low angle shot of the cab appearing out of smoke definitely connotes infernality. There are other connections between two films: for example, allusions to other instances of fire/smoke imagery used throughout Scorsese's film (the smashing of the television, for example). The fact that *Taxi Blues* exclusively features urban landscapes, specifically Moscow, as the backdrop of marginal existence, just as *Taxi Driver* features New York as the city of slime and scum. As I mentioned above, analogous to American *film noir* (which *Taxi Driver* is considered to be a remake of), Russian chernukha is an exclusively urban genre – the art trend that features depressing stories of marginalized urban populations. The cities in chernukha are apocalyptic locales, where rational representation is impossible and the air is charged with the overpowering negativity of alienated and animalistic human relations. Thus, the smoke is again a signature image of the "city of doom" and a symbolic characteristic of the emotional pressure and communicational breakdown that occurs between the two protagonists. The smoke is a metonymic image of catastrophe (literally of the car crash and symbolically of the dualism that results in the inevitable catastrophe when opposites are brought together). In terms of film style, those repetitive moments perpetuate the negative vision, accentuating the excessive ugliness and depression of the movie.

The power of chernukha art is embedded in its formal characteristics, as was demonstrated throughout this chapter. Cinematic chernukha is conveyed mainly through what could be called a film style, emphasizing non-verbal imagery and utilizing description rather than narrative to convey the message. Those characteristics, in my view, help chernukha art to acquire its transgressive nature and lead chernukha to different cinematographic trends. Thus, *Taxi Blues* is a mixture of different narrative layers (genre cinema, intercultural allusions), however, the choice of chernukha stylistics makes the film "fit" the label and classifies it as part of the chernukha phenomenon.

The other film that I want to address is regarded against the grain of what is usually considered to be chernukha (one of the connotations of the term includes "cheap" and "low-level," as Anna Lawton mentions). Alexander Sokurov's *The Second Circle* (1990), like everything else this director does, is considered "high art" and *auteur cinema*. I do not intend to discuss the nature of "art cinema" and what it entails, I only intend to make a few points.

Sokurov's works do not follow any conventional genre scheme. If they do, they result in subversion rather than affirmation; the narrative in the films is virtually non-existent and the plot development is ambiguous, with an unclear ending and beginning. There is almost no story. The issues the films addresses are quite grave and *The Second Circle* could be described as an existentialist work about the nature of death and mourning.[29] In addition, Sokurov's visual techniques in *The Second Circle,* as well as in his other films, are sophisticated, creating unusual perspectives within the frame (for example, the widely acclaimed film *Russian Ark* is shot in one three-hour take). My objective is to determine how the chernukha mode can function within such an elitist production. In this analysis I will rely on Mikhail Iampolsky's article *Death in Cinema* (originally published in Russian in *Iskusstvo Kino*, #9, 1990; in English it is included in the anthology *Re-Entering the Sign*).

The narrative of *The Second Circle,* no matter how bare it might be, still contains the "hot" topics of Glasnost, namely criticism of the Soviet system, which is embedded in the visual appearance of the city the son comes to, the institutions he goes to, the way he is treated by bureaucrats. Iampolsky writes:

> The film describes the burial process with an ascetic directness and a documentary-like attention to detail… The most uninformed viewer is able to read Sokurov's film text, to sense all the horror of death, to feel the nightmare of the last path of man in our inhuman society, and understand that this detailed description of a "Soviet" burial is nothing other than a condemnation of our *life* (270).

However, Iampolsky rightly suggests moving beyond the most explicit connotations. He argues that *The Second Circle* is the first and the most interesting representation of death in Soviet cinema. Iampolsky emphasizes a few moments: first, the subversive function in *The Second Circle* of the representation of cinematic death as spontaneous and "not real;" then, the lowering of the status of death as a ritual and cultural inscription of the reality of the dead body as an object; and finally, the concept of "tactility" that, according to Iampolsky, replaces the traditional "spectacle" perception in the film.

I argue that Sokurov's work belongs to the chernukha art mode. Although it was made at the peak of the "chernukha era" – the early 1990s – it is not part of the chernukha mainstream, represented by films such as *Little Vera* and others, which subscribe to the realist "narrative" (Bordwell) cinema with a comprehensive plotline and a clear message. At the same time, the appropriation of the chernukha style in *The Second Circle* is quite strong and the concepts of tactility and the body as object that are developed by Iamplosky can clarify how *The Second Circle* fits into the category of chernukha.

Apart from themes of chernukha mentioned above – those that criticise and expose societal evils, *The Second Circle* features strong chernukha visual characteristics. Firstly, it is shot in extremely bleak colours: everything that appears on the screen looks grey and creates a monochromatic environment. Secondly, prominent physicality and naturalism are present in abundance. The main focus of the film is basically that of the protagonist dealing (physically) with the dead body: he washes it, moves it around, puts ice on it, dresses it, sleeps next to it (there is no other bed in the room). We are consistently reminded of the gradual decay of the body (while the son is undergoing difficulties with the burial), such as bloated limbs, the watery marks on the bed, the presence of the smell, which is made explicit through characters' behaviour. The film is filled with moments that transgress all possible social conventions about death in a consistent and nauseating fashion.

Iampolsky argues that *The Second Circle* offers a subversive representation of death. This representation contradicts the cinematic conventional perception of death as "unreal" and undermines the elevated ritualistic perception of the dead body and its burial. However, the film visualizes that subversive strategy in a fashion typical for chernukha: through violent physicality (a violence that is projected towards the viewer), the presence of the cadaver and its decomposition on the screen. Iampolsky refers to that violent physicality of the dead body as to the quality of "tactility." He defines tactility as when "the spectacle is replaced by touch" (276). That replacement is supported by the critic through numerous examples of manipulating the corpse on the screen -- such as the horrific scene of washing the body in the snow outside. It is also supported by descriptive shots – usually close-ups on details of the environment (the room) and parts of the body, which create a tactile impression. The tactility, therefore, is a subversive strategy of representing death and the violation of cinematic space as the space of the spectacle. The tactility correlates with the chernukha inclination to total negation of all possible discursive representations. In the *Second Circle* such negation encompasses the nature of the cinematic medium, replacing customary perception through observation and sight with tactile perception in order to convey the excessive and horrifying reality of death.

Tactility, if to expand Iampolsky's theory, is present to different extents in the chernukha films examined previously. The close attention to physicality and body-related imagery/functions presupposes the means of tactility/tangibility as the main artistic technique of imparting to the viewer the nauseating feeling so common in chernukha film. Thus the "love scene" in *Taxi Blues* creates such a shocking effect precisely because it presents love as an intruding violence in which the viewer looses her/his position as a spectator. When we see Shlykov's ugly buttocks along with Ira's helplessly thrashing legs, the frame does not allow us to see everything that happens, leaving us as helpless as Ira, ambiguously suggesting that Shlykov might be strangling his lover. We don't see pain on her face, do not directly observe her fear, and witness only her helpless, awkward, forced position and her fist clutching to the window sill in a close-up. It is worth noting that rape or any other physical abuse in cinema is usually portrayed from the point of an observer who can see both sides, ensuring the narrative continuity customary for Hollywood cinema, for example. This is often achieved through the series of cuts from the cruel criminal to the helpless screaming victim, or from the "bad guy" to the "good guy" according to the rules of the 180° editing system that preserves spatial continuity. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson write:

> The 180° system prides itself on delineating the space clearly. The viewer should always know *where the characters are* in relation to one another and to the setting. More important the viewer knows *where he or she is* with respect to the

> story action. The space of the scene, clearly and unambiguously unfolded, does not jar or disorient, because such disorientation, it is felt, will distract the viewer from the centre of attention: the narrative chain of causes and effects (313).

Tactility in chernukha misbalances the viewer's perception from visual spectatorship into intimately close, tangible sensations (Ira's helplessness is conveyed to the viewer). In *Little Vera*, for example, the excessive presence of the bodies and body-related images within the overcrowded frame creates a forceful imposition of the body-related imagery, which results in the feeling of "throng," lack of space and suffocation, again through the misplacement of viewer's perspective.

The other point at which *The Second Circle* is heavily endowed with chernukha aesthetics is in the descriptive nature of the film. Mikhail Iampolsky writes:

> The father's body in Sokurov's work is a thing that occupies place among other things. The apartment where the action takes place seems empty. The poverty of the Soviet life holds sway, but this is an emptiness filled with objects – wretched furniture, dishes, and filthy rags. These impoverished objects are dead and alienated from the labour that created them as something human and animate (274).

The concentration on the inhuman discomfort of the Soviet daily life, typical for almost all chernukha productions, is abundantly present in *The Second Circle* through the image of the apartment of the deceased: unclean, messy, poor. The apartment, depicted in chernukha style, is the only visual representation in the film, almost the only setting. Here and throughout most of the film description takes over the narrative, not only in terms of saying more and having more power of visual representation but also in terms of the setting and the background emerging as the principal space for the film, which Iampolsky sees again as a subversion of the spectacle.

> Here space is compressed not by a neutral "off-stage" background but by the objects that absorb the body and smother its volume…*The Second Circle* is the

> film of the excluded sight in the sense that sight presupposes a spectacle. The destruction of spectacle results from the disappearance of the contour that divides the body from things (275-276).

The dominion of the descriptive background is reinforced by the extremely long takes that the film employs in Sokurov's typical manner. Thus, the film by Sokurov presents the most prominent characteristics of chernukha art, such as the negation of cultural inscription and values, the all-absorbing negativity of non-verbal dominant elements, as well as the prevailing descriptive mode of the text, when the *mise-en-scene* is heavily dependent on a setting and background that manifests itself as the primary source of visual appeal.

Moreover, *The Second Circle* seems to take all these notions to the extreme through the elaboration of tactile perception as a subversive, negative strategy for representing death and blurring the boundaries between the background and the narrative focus, where there is an absence of narrative development. Sokurov equates the image of death (the dead body) with daily objects. That strategy of placing the abject (the dead body) on the level of daily objects and functional spaces (like the bed in which the son has to sleep with the corpse) is the same that Petrushevskaia uses in her literary works, juxtaposing the horrific with the daily.

However, *The Second Circle* has never been considered or labelled as chernukha, due to its elaborate non-narrative film form and the metaphysical implications of the film (which Iampolsky calls "death in the metaphysical dimension" [271]). Chernukha was primarily regarded and is still regarded as indulgence in taboo for shock value and a focus on the depressing bleakness of the reflection of societal evils. Thus, neither *Taxi Blues* (specifically among Russian critics), nor *The Second Circle* were regarded as chernukha films; the first one was considered a dramatization of the "Russian question," the second was obviously considered as an elitist existential exploration of death as a metaphysical (figurative) phenomenon. The presence of the chernukha style and subject matter was either explained as "legacy" (Graham) or a trend of perestroika (Horton and Brashinsky), confining chernukha either to an assorted mix of elements with no unified constructive foundation that would allow for discerning and explaining the phenomenon or defining it as a temporary, reactionary style.

I suggest regarding chernukha as a unified body of artistic devices, which projects its influence primarily on the level of form, but also on the level of content. From that standpoint both productions, *Taxi Blues* and *The Second Circle,* could be regarded as falling within the artistic mode of chernukha. *The Second Circle* is an existential drama of mourning but is made in chernukha style, or rather chernukha mode. Ironically, whether the result of a conscious or an unconscious choice by Sokurov, the aesthetics of chernukha produced an effect of discrepancy with the "major mission" of the film, which is existentialist drama. In *Taxi Blues*, the idiomatic genre structure, as well as intertextual elaboration within the tradition of the "Russian question," are swept away by the overwhelming presence of negative chernukha aesthetics and are disjointed. By the same token, *The Second Circle* could be perceived primarily as a horrifying excessive discourse of filth and death typical to chernukha, rather than as a parable of "mourning and melancholia."

I have demonstrated that chernukha in film constitutes a stable discursive presence in diverse productions while preserving its core characteristics of negative excess manifested through excessive physicality, repetitive strategies, which intensify chernukha's negative vision of "return in double" and the dominance of the descriptive mode over plot development, which emphasizes chernukha's negative drive. The films also show chernukha's strategy of representational failure and communicational breakdown, featuring omnipresent conflict, subversion of cultural inscriptions and the inability to communicate among the characters of chernukha films.

I argue that these chernukha features constitute a stable structure of the phenomenon, which distinguishes it from other art modes and that those features extend to works of art that do not belong to the immediate context of perestroika. My objective in the next chapter is to demonstrate how the chernukha art mode in its core characteristics functions within more recent Russian art removed from the perestroika era, where the transgressive nature of the chernukha phenomenon allows it to revitalize its presence in contemporary Russian culture and to illustrate how that contemporary chernukha is different from the art of immediate post-Soviet context.

Chapter III. Chernukha and Postmodern Art.

In the previous chapters I have concentrated on chernukha in post-Soviet fiction and film. I have argued that the chernukha mode entails a vision of negative excess, usually contained within the formal structure of the narrative in the forms of description (in film) and/or subversion of culturally inscribed values as well as narrative strategies of inversion, grotesque ambivalence and repetition in literature. The excessive negative vision that chernukha offers is also grounded in representational failure, signified through the inability of cultural and social semiotic justifications to introduce coherent meaning into the world of chernukha poetics. This is manifested through communicational breakdown (among the inhabitants of the chernukha world, as shown in neo-naturalist prose, films such as *Little Vera,* or on a sophisticated formal level, as exemplified in works by Petrushevskaia and Sokurov). Chernukha, therefore, represents a stable pattern of thematic and formal features, distinctly recognizable in the literary and cinematic medium.

In this chapter I would like to explore the chernukha phenomenon within more recent Russian film and fiction, namely within the artistic trend in Russian fiction and film that became associated with postmodern aesthetics. The transformation of chernukha art in contemporary fiction and film bears crucial significance for understanding chernukha as an art mode that transgresses genres and trends. The attribute of "post-Soviet" in conjunction with chernukha art represents a certain limitation set upon chernukha. Chernukha is mainly associated with the perestroika period, which gave rise to the phenomenon. The majority of critical studies address chernukha art within that period. However, the defining characteristics of chernukha, such as a vision that is negative and excessive, a focus on the abject and the subversion of culturally or socially inscribed discourse provide a background that connects chernukha to postmodern aesthetics.

I will take two case studies of fiction and film that, in my opinion, represent the shift of the chernukha paradigm into the field of postmodern aesthetics and what that transformation entails. For the textual analysis I will take a story by Vladimir Sorokin, a contemporary Russian conceptualist writer, as a case study for postmodern chernukha in fiction. In film, I will analyze Alexei Balabanov's *Brother* (1997) for its representation of chernukha.

The question of Russian postmodernism is a complex one. Criticism concerning the existence of Russian postmodernism revolves around the determination of a specifically Russian context for the development of postmodern art. Critics like Mikhail Epstein, Viacheslav Kuritsyn and Mark Lipovetsky are involved in the debate around postmodern art in contemporary Russian fiction.[30] The main argument of Mikhail Epstein, for example, in his study *The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (1995) concerns the fact that the development of Russian Modernism and the Avant-garde was cut short by the Soviet regime, the imposition of which produced the forms of resistant dissident art. That fact characterizes Russian postmodernism in terms of returning to the Avant-garde legacy as well as deconstruction of the Soviet metanarrative. Those peculiarities of literary development presumably pose the question of correspondence between Russian and Western postmodern art.

With regards to the postmodern literary and cinematic works that I propose to discuss below, I would like to concentrate on the common aspects of postmodern aesthetics as exemplified by Western criticism rather than to explore the differences between Russian and Western postmodernism, which is a separate topic. My objective is to explore how the characteristics of postmodern aesthetics fit into the category of chernukha as an artistic mode that persistently reveals its presence within Russian contemporary art.

For the purposes outlined above I will limit myself to the two common features attributed to postmodern art. First, I will examine the subversion of metanarrative, as theorized by Jean-Francois Lyotard in *Postmodern Condition* (1984). Secondly, I will examine the concept of heterogeneity that was developed by Georges Bataille and is regarded as characteristic of postmodern aesthetics and the postmodern condition in general.[31]

Jean-François Lyotard introduces the notion of "metanarrative," a dominant discourse that legitimizes knowledge distribution and establishes a hierarchy of values in society. The specifics of the "postmodern condition," as Lyotard suggests, lie in the rejection of metanarratives, giving priority to "small narratives" and plurality of discursive practices. Thus, the new forms of knowledge in postmodern culture are dispersed combinations of heterogeneous "language games" rather than stable discursive structures of cultural representation. The "incredulity" of metanarratives gives rise to the subversion of the dominant discourse by turning it into a pluralistic multiplicity of "language games." The "incredulity" of dominant cultural constructs manifests itself in postmodern poetics in several ways. Firstly, it manifests itself through the rejection of a strong authorial point of view (see *The Death of the Author* by Roland Barthes), as well as through the rejection of art's "high mission," focusing instead on the playful nature of intertextual allusions. As Umberto Eco points out in his *Postscript to the Name of the Rose* (1984), postmodern art does not reject the past (unlike Modernism and Avant-garde) but rather incorporates it into a pastiche of eclectic intertextual play. Secondly, the subversion of metanarrative is a deconstructive effort; the "incredulity" of metanarratives is essentially "incredulity" of language as a referential device, which represents objective reality.[32] As a result, postmodern art exhibits what Lyotard calls "presenting the existence of the unpresentable" [33] (or Sublime) as well as a deterioration of the referential power of language as the sole means of representation. Chernukha's anti-representational drive and subversion of cultural representation is particularly relevant to the notions of "incredulity" of language developed by Lyotard as well as his concept of subversion of metanarrative. Both those notions are common to chernukha and postmodern art.

Chernukha characteristics such as taboo violation and attention to the obscene and marginal (attention to the abject) correspond to another artistic notion important for postmodernism, that of heterogeneity. The concept of heterogeneity was first developed by Bataille in his essays *The Psychological Structure of Fascism* (1931) and *The Use Value of D. A. F de Sade* (1930). Bataille defines heterogeneity, as opposed to social homogeneity, as "the state of the social order and the system of cultural prohibitions and restrictions." Heterogeneity, on the other hand, belongs to the realm of marginal existence and experiences, violating the cultural and social norm, transgressing towards the "sacred" domain of the incommensurate, which could not be measured, governed or explained through reason. Bataille writes that:

> This [heterogeneousness] consists of everything rejected by homogenous society

> as waste or superior transcendent value. Included are the waste products of the human body and certain analogous matter (trash, vermin, etc.); the parts of the body; persons, words, or acts having a suggestive erotic value; the various unconscious processes such as dreams or neuroses…(*Visions of Excess*, 142)

Furthermore, heterogeneity encompasses marginal social statuses (which is important for chernukha's marginal characters and specifically for the analysis of the film *Brother* as I will demonstrate later). Bataille states that marginal figures are those who refuse to abide by social norms: "mobs, the warrior, aristocratic and impoverished classes, different types of violent individuals..." (142)

Heterogeneity, then, is linked to excessive marginalized phenomena. Bataille, in describing the heterogeneous, relies on Nietzsche's concept of the "Dionysian state" as "yearning for the ugly," the unspeakable horror that "grips man when he suddenly looses his way among the cognitive forms of the phenomenal world, as the principle of reason…appears to break down" (*Birth of Tragedy,* 22). The nature of the heterogeneous has two major implications, which could be tied to the chernukha phenomenon. The first implication is the excessive taboo-breaking and violent nature of the heterogeneous:

> *Violence, excess, delirium, madness* characterize heterogeneous elements…This characteristic does not appropriately apply to inert objects, yet the latter do present certain conformity with extreme emotions (if it is possible to speak of the violent and excessive nature of a decomposing body). (*Visions of Excess* 142)

Heterogeneity is simultaneously an excessive effect and an excessive vision (of violence, death or sexuality) that transgresses the frames of ordinary experience into the realm of anti-representational nauseating discourse. In his other works Bataille calls the focus on heterogeneousness a focus on "nausea and vertigo," indicating that heterogeneity encompasses both the abject and disgust as well as the sublime – passion for the unspeakable Nietzschean abyss of Dionysus covered by a "veil" of culture.[34]

The second implication is the "sacred" world of heterogeneity; violent excess is the "representation of unrepresentable," which Lyotard also defines as Sublime, and the main subject of postmodern art. I have also previously mentioned the related notion of abjection, which Kristeva directly relates to the sublime and art, as a way of "channeling" the abject.

Chernukha art also employs these dual characteristics of heterogeneity producing an excessive effect of disgust in response to the uncontrollable power of excess, the totalizing negative vision. The best example of these characteristics is the abundance of pathological details in chernukha fiction and film related to the body and bodily functions. This obsession could manifest itself as in Petrushevskaia's works that juxtapose the literary physiological depictions with the ultimate horror of the abject ("nausea and vertigo") or it is also manifested through the tangible, nauseating physicality of the dead body in the *Second Circle*.

The other important aspect is chernukha's rejection of representational models, denial of communication and the depressing tone of fatal misunderstanding that permeate film productions (for example, the fatal communicational break down resulted in death and crime in *Little Vera*) and literary works (the broken communicational channel between the reader and the text in works by Petrushevskaia).

Another aspect of the concept of heterogeneity is especially relevant for postmodern aesthetics: that of the "heterogeneous subject," which I hope to link to the postmodern chernukha, specifically in film. Representing the defeat of "reason" and cultural semiosis, heterogeneity also reflects the fall of the Cartesian subject, the understanding of human reason and human subjectivity as a totality of absolute referential power. Bataille describes the state of the heterogeneous subject as transgressive and marginal, contradictory to such values as the power of reason and the unity of subjectivity imposed by the "project of Enlightenment" (Lyotard), or Logos, as Derrida expresses it.

The delirious, violent, erotic, affectionate and ecstatic are conditions within heterogeneity that dwell on disturbing social and metaphysical order. Bataille connects the notion of the subject to the completely arbitrary nature of its existence: "the total improbability of coming into the world" with "total heterogeneity" (130), indicating the unstable nature of human subjectivity, its drive to death (Freud) and convulsions of reason over the "sacred," guilt and horror. The writings of Bataille are hard to classify because his writings are in themselves exemplary of "subversion of the power of Logos," as Derrida puts it. Nonetheless, twentieth-century thought found those notions quite productive for the deconstructive project of postmodernity.

The heterogeneous subject appears as a distorted entity: a formulation of discursive practices (Foucault); the nomadic subject of shifting identities (Deleuze); the reconstructed subject under the gaze of the Other (Lacan), to name but a few conceptualizations of the heterogeneous subject. What is common to all of the theoretical implications is the new understanding of human subjectivity as "disseminated" and discrepant, not equal to itself. Subjectivity is destabilized through the failure of the referential power of reason. The representational failure is the result of the lost totality of logocentric subjectivity and the destruction of the ultimate power of referential structures within linguistic experience and cultural semiosis. The cultural signification shifts into the domain of simulacrum (Baudrillard), when the sign refers to another sign forming a chain of referential representations, the end of which in an "objective reality" is constantly deferred and only simulated.

Postmodernism as a cultural condition reflects the dispersed nature of the heterogeneous subject through the failure of representational constructions to place a finite meaning on subjectivity or reality. The communicational breakdown is not the lost ground of communication, but rather a void that has absorbed the referential power of language and stability of subjectivity. That statement sounds somewhat graver and more desperate than the usual playful eclectic engagement of postmodern literature in "heterogeneous language games." There is a tragic undertone of mourning over the "death of the subject" (which, of course, is simultaneously the "death of God"), which postmodern aesthetics do not usually project but which is present nonetheless.

This way the postmodern films of Peter Greenway or Lars Von Trier explore the notions of heterogeneity through the violent and marginal language as well as display an elaborated canvas of dispersed subjectivity and inadequacy of representation. *Dogville* (2004) by Von Trier presents a discrepancy between theatricality and reality, equating the two in a horrifying imagery of violence. The postmodern detachment, therefore, can exist in different dimensions, projecting horrific and disgusting as much as playful and ironic. This is especially important to note in the relation of chernukha art to postmodern aesthetics, because chernukha art is generally not funny, if it employs humour it is usually black humour (such is the bitter humour and irony of the protagonist in *Our Crowd* when she talks about complexes of her friends like an eye that falls out or D-cup breasts). Chernukha sets a gloomy and nauseating tone, a heavy atmosphere of conflict (as in *Little Vera* and *Taxi Blues*) and despair (as in *The Second Circle*, when we see the protagonist trying to bury his father) rather than playful and eclectic mood.

Thus, there are three major areas on which I would like to concentrate in discussing the transgressive nature of chernukha in postmodern Russian art. Firstly, I will examine the deconstructive subversion of metanarrative discourse. Secondly, I will examine the notion of heterogeneity as the excessive mode of marginality and violence that represents the concept of "ultimate transgression," (Bataille), the transgression that leaps beyond social or cultural understanding and encoding. That transgression includes the realist encoding of the art work, which is still the case in the majority post-Soviet chernukha works analyzed above, with the exception of the more borderline cases of Petrushevskaia and *The Second Circle*. Finally, I will examine the manifestations of the heterogeneous subject within the representational void of failed semiotic structures.

1. Chernukha and Postmodern Literature: Case Study of Vladimir Sorokin

Chernukha-like material in contemporary postmodern texts is quite prolific: Vladimir Sorokin's works, for example, are full of obscene, scatological, pathological scenes. The attention to heterogeneous subject-matters: violence, suffering, pathology, as well as attention to the colloquial definitions of chernukha, i.e. foul language [мат], extreme pornography, incest, necrophilia and cannibalism is so prominent among some postmodern writers (Vladimir Sorokin, Viktor Erofeev, Egor Radov and others) that it might suggest new ways that chernukha expresses itself in literature. To illustrate my argument I will analyze Vladimir Sorokin's short story *Next Item on the Agenda* (1997). Vladimir Sorokin's work is notorious in using chernukha style. However, critics have neglected chernukha presence in Sorokin's works, classifying Sorokin mainly as a postmodern writer.

My objective is to show how Vladimir Sorokin's postmodern writings fit in the definition of chernukha art mode, i.e. how they correlate with its core characteristics of negative excess, taboo and transgression, heterogeneity and the abject and, finally, the representational failure and subversion of culturally inscribed norms. At the same time I intend to trace the development of the chernukha art mode into postmodernism as an art trend and to establish the differentials that influence the course of that transgression. I intend to define the differences and similarities between chernukha in Sorokin's work and chernukha of the previously analyzed texts – those of Astafiev, Makanin and Petrushevskaia.

Vladimir Sorokin belongs to the "underground" generation of writers who began writing in the years of stagnation under Brezhnev's rule but became well known only with the arrival of perestroika. Sorokin belongs to the Moscow Conceptual School, where he started as an artist in the late 1970s. The Moscow Conceptual School was an underground art movement of writers and artists who practiced in the visual and literary genres (performance and installation are the prioritized art forms). The leading literary figures are Lev Rubinstein, Dmitry Aleksandrovich Prigov, Vsevolod Nekrasov and Vladimir Sorokin.

The term *Moscow Conceptualism* was coined by Boris Groys, who defined it as "a romantic version of international conceptual art." [35] Conceptual art is primarily understood as "art about art," in which modes of production and reflection upon art's own artifice are more important than the artifact itself. Moscow Conceptualism is heavily influenced by pop-art, to which it added another component – Sots-art (by Komar and Melamid), consequently focusing on Socialist Realism instead of pop-culture. Moscow conceptual Sots-art ironically deconstructs the totalizing discourse of Socialist Realism, eventually aiming at dismantling any dominant discourse *as such* (a highly deconstructivist and postmodernist intention). The major device is subversion through mimicry (or "diving into context"), when the parody is constituted by mimicking the structures and clichés [*kontsepty*] of the dominant discourse, diminishing it to the level of the absurd. This action evokes the postcolonial concept of mimic[illegible]esistance when "the same but not quite" (Homi K. Bhabha) is the very ground for subversion. In conceptualism the highly ironic and citational style is joined with anti-establishment, provocative intentions of a romantic, avant-garde and anti-totalitarian nature.

Vladimir Sorokin became widely and somewhat scandalously known in the early 1990s for works that were clearly identified within the tradition of Sots-art. His early novellas such as *Ochered* [Queue], *Pervyi Subbotnik* [First Subbotnik], and novels *Tridtsataia Liubov Mariny* [Marina's Thirtieth Love], *Norma* [The Norm] and others explore the grounds for undermining the totalitarian canon of official, highly ideologized language. Sorokin in general does not have his "own" literary style, he is always working with established literary discourses, deconstructing them: be it the discourse of the Russian literary canon as in the novels *Roman* [Roman/Novel] or *Goluboe Salo* [Blue Lard], or the language of the contemporary media in the novel *Led* [Ice]. Serafima Roll writes:

> Sorokin's interest lies in exploring the limits of the totalitarian and oppressive nature of expression. For him, every artistic movement…and every verbal statement is a form of oppression and violence towards an individual. Sorokin's

> creative drive is therefore geared towards exposing the totalitarian nature of discourse. (*Contextualizing Transition* 158-159)

Therefore, for Sorokin, what matters is not "what" but rather "how." The unfolding of the *siuzhet* reveals the deconstructive strategy Sorokin uses, which is typical for all his writings but puts him in a unique position in regards to other conceptualist writers who also deconstruct the totalitarian languages (such as D. A. Prigov or Timur Kibirov). The device Sorokin uses is that he thoroughly imitates whatever discourse he deconstructs (the discourse of Socialist Realism and the language of propaganda is the most common). After many (and the number could be several hundred) pages of stylization the text is suddenly interrupted by a spontaneous, absurd, usually radically violent (or perverse) shift that annihilates the meaning of everything written before. It could be a ritual murder [*Next Item on the Agenda*], cannibalism [*Nastia*] or an absurd chain of words [*The Norm*].

Consequently, *Next Item on the Agenda* starts as a typical Socialist Realist story about a worker who is brought to a peer-trial by the Professional Union Committee. After a dozen pages of profound and sincere imitation of socialist narrative the story experiences an unusual twist and turns into the ritual murder of a cleaning lady who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The characters scream in some sort of ecstatic state, commit various bizarre obscene actions (throw up, scratch themselves, etc.) and then stab the victim with five identical pipes and fill the holes with some sort of "grave worms." The leader of the ritual is the policeman, who is presented at the beginning of the story as a fan of classical music and who carries a cello case containing the ritualistic murder weapons. The authoritative figure of justice appears to be the murderer with a "higher" sanction. It is an easily traced allusion: the Soviet ritual of *tovarischeskii sud* or "peer trial" equals a murder ritual, *ergo*, both are senseless.

By abruptly introducing radical violence Sorokin juxtaposes different types of discourse: conventional, ideologically bound language and the non-comprehensive obscene language of violence, language that does not make sense and is not rationalized into coherent narrative – the language of heterogeneous experiences, which is also a language prioritized by chernukha art. Sorokin continuously provides detailed descriptions of violent, absurd acts and disgusting details:

> Звягинцева медленно поднялась со стула, руки ее затряслись, пальцы с ярко накрашенными ногтями согнулись. Она вцепилась себе ногтями в лицо и потянула руки вниз, разрывая лицо до крови...
>
> Старухин резко встал со стула, оперся руками о стол и со всего маха ударился лицом о стол...
>
> Симакова крепко обхватила его за плечи. Ее вырвало на затылок Хохлова. (Cited from *Russkie Tsvety Zla* [Russia's Fleurs du Mal] 375)
>
> Zvyagintseva rose slowly from her chair, her hands started shaking, and her fingers with their brightly painted nails became bent. She dug her nails into her face and scraped her hands downwards, leaving bloody furrows the whole length of her face…
>
> Starukhin stood up sharply in his chair, placed his hands on the table and then smashed his face against the table with all his might…
>
> Simakova grabbed him firmly from behind by the shoulders. She vomited over the back of Khokhlov's head. (338-339)

The distinctive stylistic features here, apart from the conceptual intention, are the casual, specifically detailed depiction of violence and the intentional obscenity of almost every sentence. All these elements are justifiably attributed to chernukha. However, there is still the question of whether to consider a text such as *Next Item on the Agenda* to be chernukha.

Chernukha has very strong ties with the realistic tradition in literature. Chernukha produces its shocking and disgusting effect precisely because the reader perceives it within the realist conventions as being "truthful to life." Even considering more borderline cases, such as those of Makanin and Petrushevskaia, they still subscribe to the tradition of realist narration, i.e. realist at least in the respect that the reader can recognize and relate to the psychological state of the narrator. Texts of Petrushevskaia and Makanin still refer to the realist mode of narration, which is understood in terms of meeting the reader's conventional expectations. Such an expectation is: narrative coherency (not necessarily tied to causal relations), i.e. that everything happening or imagined in the text could at least hypothetically come into being or be imagined. I do not intend to redefine realism, which Lilian Furst, for example, defines as "the accurate, detailed, unembellished depiction of nature or of contemporary life," but rather to broaden the implications of realistic narrative for texts that might not necessarily "truthfully" depict life but still suggest the realistic conventions of reading, that is when the recognition by the reader comes from the common perception and common ground of experience, whereas conceptual texts by Sorokin require recognition that comes from the ground of literary artifice and the constructed nature of the narration rather than related experience.

Thus, Russian reader, accepting chernukha, had a hard time adjusting to the fiction of Vladimir Sorokin, who was sued for the promotion of pornography precisely because of conventions that are misinterpreted when his works are read from the realistic standpoint. Unlike Astafiev's naturalist text the chernukha elements found in Sorokin's texts, i.e. extreme violence and obscenity, bear a purely literary significance. They are not justified by narrative structure (coherence), nor do they vocalize the muted discourse of taboo zones because, again, they do not serve the purpose of revealing the truth, liberating desire or any other narrative legitimization (the reader understands why this and that happened) that is found in works of Petrushevskaia or Makanin. To exemplify that point I have chosen the following passage, which is a description of the ritual murder:

> Труба прошла сквозь тело уборщицы и ударила в стол. Пискунов взял вторую трубу и приставил к спине уборщицы. Черногаев ударил по торцу трубы кувалдой. Труба прошла сквозь тело уборщицы и ударила в стол...[далее повторение] Пискунов взял пятую трубу и приставил ее к спине уборщицы. Черногаев ударил кувалдой по торцу трубы. Труба прошла сквозь тело уборщицы и ударила в стол.
> -Вытягоно...Вытягоно...- забормотал Хохлов в кучку сгребенных им рвотных масс. (377)
>
> Piskunov wrapped both his hands around the pipe to hold it steady. Chernogaev started hitting the butt of the pipe with the sledgehammer. The pipe went clean through the cleaner's body and came to rest in the table with a thud. Piskunov took the second pipe and positioned it on the cleaner's back. Chernogaev hit the butt of the pipe with the sledgehammer. [further – repetition]. Piskunov took the fifth pipe and positioned it on the cleaner's back. Chernogaev hit the butt of the pipe with the sledgehammer. The pipe went clean through the cleaner's body and came to rest in the table with a thud.
> 'Pulleat…Pulleat…' muttered Khokhlov into the pile of vomited bits he had scraped together. (341-342)

The repetitive, intensified structure of the process of the murder, told in a report-like manner, reminds us of the neonaturalist chernukha style of Astafiev. However, the context of the story suggests the literary, arbitrary nature of this violence, which is absurd in the context of literary artistry, not realist description. It serves the conceptual purpose of deconstructing the narrative. The reader is supposed to be smart enough to perceive it as such. Defamiliarization [*ostranenie* (Shklovsky)] from the conventional forms of realist narration should be joined with recognition [*uznavanie*] of the conceptual artistry, which creates a framework for conceptualist subversion. Self-reflexive conceptualism produces self-aware chernukha. The same point is made by Viktor Erofeev:

> Возникает вторичный стиль, *чернуха*, жизненные ужасы и патология воспринимаются скорее как забава, литературный прием, как уже проверенная возможность поиграть в острые ощущения. (29)
>
> A secondary style arises, chernukha, 'black stuff', a 'slanderous' and sensationalist 'dirty art' in which the horrors of life and pathological behaviour are treated as more of an amusement, a literary device, a tried and tested way of playing with extremes of feeling. (Introduction by Viktor Erofeev, xxix)

The conceptualist/postmodern conventions insist on the playfulness and deliberate unreality of violence or pathology: the blood is not real blood and suffering is not real suffering (and literature is just black marks on the page – a famous statement made by Sorokin himself). Sorokin makes use of chernukha as another appropriated language that the reader recognizes, or is supposed to recognize and react to appropriately.

Sorokin deals with the subversion of stable discourses (metanarratives): he subverts the discourse of Socialist Realism and uses chernukha as an intertextual reference when ironic detachment subverts the thematic intentions common to chernukha, i.e. to depict the horrors of real life, to reveal the truth, to verbalize the repressed, to conjoin abjection and everyday. Thus, Sorokin successfully plays with chernukha discourse, dismantling it in the fashion in which he treats Soviet ideology. That is comparable to the violence in the works of Western postmodernist artists such as Quentin Tarantino, whose movies are no more than a mockery of humanitarian ideals and free play with realistic conventions.

However, chernukha, in my opinion, at the same time acquires a new meaning in Sorokin's texts despite the fact that it is a parody of itself. The formal structure of Sorokin's works – such as mimicry of a certain language, a rapid destruction of that language through obscenity and violence, are typical to chernukha. A concentration on taboo and disgusting matters produces a shocking effect – creates the space for "conceptual" self-reflecting chernukha as the only means for the subversion of the metanarrative and for the transgression into the heterogeneous domain of distorted bodies and extreme violence. Chernukha is not only an appropriated discourse turned into a parody of itself, but also a self-reflective literary technique, a means of destroying the totalitarian language, the annihilating power of violence, which is already purely conceptual.

Sorokin employs subversion of the dominant discourse through the means of using chernukha as an artistic mode, which specifically deals with heterogeneous reality and annihilates power of speech (Logos) from any standpoint. Thus, the language of chernukha itself is muted through the parodic postmodern twist of absurd "unreal" violence. That leaves space for chernukha to emerge as "ultimate transgression" into the void that is not represented through any cultural encoding but stands for heterogeneity as the field of transgressive experience of excessive negativity and pure violence.

Therefore, Sorokin's postmodern chernukha possess such features as negative excess of obscene style and focus on physicality, inherent in the chernukha analyzed above. However it differs from literary chernukha, which I have discussed above, because it transforms chernukha into a self-reflective literary technique, transgressing the realist narrative mode and entering into the conceptual postmodern mode. Sorokin's prose still displays chernukha qualities, common to all chernukha modifications, namely the employment of chernukha as a means of subversion of metanarrative constructs, creating a cultural void, free of representational structures. That cultural void is the leap that Sorokin's texts make into the transgressive space of ultimate destruction and violence, where no cultural or discursive significations exist. That topos of pure heterogeneity and ultimate transgression constitutes the excessive negative vision of postmodern chernukha.

The ultimate transgression into the void of destroyed semiotic systems distinguishes Sorokin from other postmodern writers who also use chernukha-like thematics in their works. The most prominent example is Viktor Erofeev. However, for Erofeev, literature is a playground of intertextual "bouncing." Dealing with heterogeneous topics, Erofeev employs them in an allegorical fashion by dismantling cultural identities. Thus, his story *Popugaichik* [Parakeet] (1989) is an allegory of paternal myths, starting with Soviet ideology and ending with Biblical allusions destroyed through the imagery of torture and the mutilation of the body (as discussed by Helena Goscilo in *Body Talk in Current Fiction*). Postmodern writings, such as those of Erofeev, strive for ironic subversion rather than total negation; the objective for Erofeev is not to mute all voices, leaving an emptiness of excessive negativity, but rather to employ discursive constructions in a free play of parodic "recontextualizations" (Hutcheon). Erofeev's chernukha-esque material is not charged with the negative excess of the phenomenon. It does not bear the deadly serious character of Sorokin's works either, whose "seriousness" is explained through the excessive drive towards destructive and muting violence that leaves no room even for the reading pleasure of literary, constructed artifice.

2. New Russian Cinema and Chernukha: *Brother* by Alexei Balabanov.

All the productions I have looked at so far are mainly films of the perestroika or early post-Soviet eras. Alexei Balabanov's film *Brother* (1997) and its sequel, *Brother 2* (2000), belong to a new wave in Russian cinema that combines the features of the Western genre cinema and experiments with new technology in a specifically Russian contemporary context. The genres that the younger generation is working in are primarily the gangster film (*Anti-Killer*, 2002 by Egor Konchalovsky), action and thriller (*Moi Brat Frankenshtein* [My Brother Frankenstein], 2004] by Valery Todorovsky and *Zvezda* [The Star], 2002 by Alexei Lebedev). Much less frequent is drama, usually with a slight hint of magic realism and/or suspense (Khudoinazarov's *Shic*, 2003; Zviagintsev's *Vozvrashchenie* [The Return], 2003; Rogozhkin's *Kukushka* [The Cuckoo], 2002).[36]

The presence of generic models usually adopted from the West is one of the key characteristics that defines Russian cinema today as well as separates it from the perestroika era. The generic models that Russian filmmakers assimilate are usually closely connected with so-called "Hollywood Classical Cinema," which is the predominant mode of narrative form of certain genre productions. According to Bordwell and Thompson, Hollywood narrative is usually characterized by objective narration, a causality relationship and linear narrative, individualistic psychological motivation and definite closure (or as Stephen Heath noted, the "restabilization" of the narrative after a temporary "destabilization," which constitutes the plot of the film). Those narrative principles that govern genre productions are transported to the Russian cinema, firstly, for economic reasons (to compete with the Hollywood films for audiences), and secondly, because of the lack of genre traditions within Soviet cinema.

Obviously, Soviet cinema had genre films (melodrama, criminal drama, historical drama, spy thriller, musical, slapstick comedy, science fiction and even the western, though not much). However, the generic models of Soviet cinema were subject to the predominant mode of Socialist Realism, not as an imposing obligatory code, but rather an intrusive angle from which the generic formula had to develop.[37] That censorship especially affected action genres because they are usually built on the struggle of "good and evil," and there was a very clear framework for the depiction of good and evil in the Soviet ideological apparatus. Thus, Stanislav Govorukhin's *Piraty Dvadtsatogo Veka* [Pirates of the 20th Century], produced in the middle of the 1980s, which was meant to be an adventure film, cast the exploitation of capitalist society as the background for the motivation of the "bad guys." There were absolute successes in the genre cinema in the Soviet Union as well (the very same director made a very good criminal thriller and a Soviet blockbuster *Mesto Vstrechi Izmenit Nelzia* [The Meeting Place Should Not Be Changed]). However, the ideology injected to a certain extent into all film productions (with, perhaps, the sole exceptions of dissident and high art) made it impossible for post-Soviet filmmakers to transfer Soviet traditions of genre cinema to the new Russian cinema.

It is already evident in Loungine's *Taxi Blues* that the post-Soviet cinema takes a different direction than in the appropriation of the Soviet legacy. As I have noted before, *Taxi Blues* takes up the dynamism and action-driven plot of the thriller. However, it could not maintain fidelity to the conventions of the generic logic, such as a definite conclusion (preferably happy), the provision of individualistic psychological motivation for the protagonists (the chernukha quality of concentrating on socially determined behaviour prevailed); finally the strong descriptive mode of the film contradicts the mode of genre productions, which are driven by the development of the plot.

In *Brother,* just like in the majority of other new Russian productions, generic conventions have a stronger presence and a purer form. Thus, Danila's story has all the necessary elements of the "crime thriller." Bordwell and Thompson define crime thriller as a genre that evolves around crime and usually has three categories of characters involved in the story in different dispositions: "the lawbreakers, the law enforcers, and innocent victims or bystanders" (112). Some of the formal features of the genres include emphasized surprise and suspense. *Brother* probably stands on the border between crime thriller and gangster film because its protagonist is a criminal as well, though he projects a positive attitude and arouses sympathy in the viewer. Danila was not meant to be a criminal but the circumstances (his brother) made him such. And here is already a chernukha touch that contradicts the genre formula: the protagonist is driven by circumstances without resisting them. Otherwise, the two categories of innocent bystander (Sveta and Hoffman) and lawbreaker (Viktor, the mafia) are present. *Brother* also presents a clever use of suspense and surprise.

Despite the strong presence of a generic formula (especially in the plot, i.e. on the level of content), the question of whether the film is just like any other Hollywood crime thriller remain. Firstly, because *Brother* is specifically set in a contemporary Russian context and speaks in a language targeted to a contemporary audience (the pervasive presence of the Russian rock movement, for example). Secondly, the existence of

Hollywood-like filmmaking in contemporary Russia is questionable from the economic point of view: conditions are not suited to the mass-production of films. Any film currently made in Russia is still an individual product, made under the name of the director, who is still the main power in film production in Russia – not the producer. *Brother* is no exception and is an individual product of its director, Alexei Balabanov. Thirdly, as I intend to demonstrate in the course of this chapter, *Brother* is more complex than generic conventions presuppose.

If the generic nature of *Brother* is one of the aspects that link it to the new Russian cinema, the other important aspect, which is particularly relevant to the study of chernukha, is the connection of *Brother* with the Soviet cinematic legacy. All productions that I have examined are not far removed from the post-Soviet era and contain numerous references to it. To refer just to one example, I have already noted that *Little Vera's* narrative is permeated by the Soviet related discourse: all the problems that Vera faces (including disillusionment) are because of the hypocrisy and hollowness of the Soviet existence, the ideology that does not convince anymore; at the same time everything that Vera knows and feels is bred by Soviet existence. The same abundance of reflections and reassessment of the Soviet legacy exists in *Taxi Blues* and even in *The Second Circle*. The Soviet past, being a very recent and powerful reality in lives of the millions, was the focal point of reflection and reference for early post-Soviet filmmakers.

The new Russian cinema has weakened ties with the Soviet legacy, and even when it appropriates the Soviet past (or rather exploits it), it does so through the detached work of nostalgia and pastiche, when the referential power of the Soviet ideology becomes a playground for artistic experimentation. Examples of such films are *The Star* and *The Cuckoo*, which are contemporary films about World War II that employ the Soviet past in the dynamic generic constructions of action thriller (*The Star*) and melodrama (*The Cuckoo*). However, neither refers to the Soviet past as a depiction of the actual past, but rather as a conventional generic situation that could happen anywhere, anytime; hence, the historical context is shrunk to the minimum. The connotations of Soviet cinematic discourse about war are played upon with ironic detachment, in the postmodern fashion of intertextual play with no serious intentions of satire or historical reflection upon the totalitarian society or metaphysical implications of war as *conditio humanis*.

Brother as well presents a departure, not only from the immediate perestroika or post-Soviet period, but also from the main concerns of those periods. It is manifested primarily by the fact that any historicity is deliberately absent from the film. Danila denies and conceals the fact that he fought in Chechnya. The fact that it actually comes across in the film reinforces the assumption that the past and all references to it are not welcome in Danila's world (he always lives in the here and now) and that he makes a conscious effort to avoid it. However, his deliberate amnesia and deceit might just as well be suggestive of the opposite: the past is not spoken of, but it is there nonetheless. To trace chernukha elements or the presence of chernukha aesthetics even in altered forms would prove the persistent presence of the phenomenon within Russian culture – its adaptable and transgressive nature. That double gesture in the treatment of the past in *Brother* has a special significance for a study of chernukha in terms of tracing the presence of chernukha aesthetics and how far removed they are from the chernukha of perestroika.

Brother is a cult film of the late 1990s and is considered to be the first Russian national blockbuster: its popularity is attested to by the demand for the sequel *Brother 2.*[38] Apparently, *Brother* manifested the ability to respond to contemporary sensibilities, specifically among the younger audience. There are a few things that are unique about *Brother*: firstly, it features the long-awaited appearance of the "hero," an active protagonist, with whom the audience can relate and sympathize. Secondly, it is a contemporary production that is wrapped up in contemporary culture: featuring the rock movement eternally beloved by Russians (and which is another link to the perestroika cinema, which had a whole trend of youth counter culture film); the quest of a tough provincial boy to succeed in the metropolis of Saint Petersburg as well as in the criminal underworld. The film also features a good deal of action.

Another key to film's popularity is the specifically Russian context in which the film is shot and the specifically Russian audience at which it the film is targeted. This Russian context is described by Birgit Beumers in her article *To Moscow! To Moscow? The Russian Hero and the Loss of the Centre* in terms of debunking the Soviet hero mythology and substituting it with other figures, none of which fulfil the centralized, holistic vision of the Soviet heroics. The other point that is central to the "hero mythology," upon which Beumers elaborates, is the relevance of the hero-figure in *Brother* to the "Russian idea" and to the whole issue of national identity. All these aspects make *Brother* a unique production in terms of elaborating genre structures (and possibly altering them) into a specifically Russian contemporary context of shifted centers and misplaced identities.

I intend to establish a connection between the hero-image created in the film and the postmodernist aesthetics, which help to undermine genre conventions. The question of *Brother's* postmodern features has not yet been discussed by criticism, either in Russia or in the West. I believe that, just like in fiction by Sorokin, chernukha in film exceeds the boundaries set by the perestroika era and shifts the paradigm of its negative vision into the mode of postmodernism, altering the traditional perception of chernukha aesthetics. The other question I intend to explore is the importance of the sound track and auditory background in *Brother* as one of the key techniques of moving the chernukha mode in a new direction.

The story is shot at a dynamic pace, with elaborate combat scenes. The protagonist exemplifies all the qualities of the perfect action hero: he is fast, skilful with weapons, ruthless towards his enemies, kind towards his friends and true to his word even in a situation of complete betrayal. The viewers are aware from the start that Viktor was setting his brother up in order to save his own neck from the mafia. In the end, when Viktor, humiliated and naked, begs Danila for forgiveness in his apartment filled with dead bodies and blood, Danila shows kindness and an unshaken belief in family bonds, reminding Viktor that Danila has always regarded him as a father and could never betray him. Danila seems to be always assertive and on target with everything he does, however, this assertiveness is of a rather strange nature, as Danila is not really interested in criminal power fights; all he is interested in is music by Russian rock musicians.

The obsession with music is one of the primary ways in which the conventions of the crime thriller are subverted. In fact, Danila does not live in the world where he consistently performs acts of violence and other deadly sins. The specific technique that the director uses is that of subjective perspective. We, as spectators, see all that surrounds Danila and everything he does, but this reality is altered through the constant presence of the soundtrack, which seems to tell a separate story. This sound track is ambiguously presented as diegetic sound that naturally turns into non-diegetic sound and vice versa, playing with the conventional perception of sound in cinema. Thus, Danila wanders around streets of Saint Petersburg listening to music. This is internal diegetic sound (Bordwell and Thompson); we assume that the music is real and not conventional though we cannot hear what is playing in Danila's headphones. However, the same music appears as a typical non-diegetic musical commentary to the film (as in the end of the film). These boundaries are blurry and the viewer is deliberately deceived as to the nature of the soundtrack. Moreover, the soundtrack is charged with words and a separate story, that of the songs. Birgit Beumers writes:

> The songs endow the film with a dream-like quality. Bagrov's movements are paced by the rhythm of the music, and thus appear as though they were performed under a spell or under the influence of drugs, but not by any individual who reflects upon the surrounding reality. He acts almost from his subconscious. (85)

The soundtrack does not represent a musical background that re-emphasizes the storyline or, as in the majority of Hollywood productions, creates a sense of suspense, melodramatic tension etc. Russian rock is specifically characterized by attention to the word, where text as a medium is as important as the music. That attention to the word comes from the Soviet times when banned rock groups conveyed their message of dissent through their lyrics. Thus, *Nautilus'* songs are important because they tell the story, they represent an independent narrative that assesses Danila's actions and the film narrative in a different fashion than does the actual cinematic narration, which is remarkably free of judgement, with the absence of an authorial or narrative voice that might provide clues of how to interpret the actions of the protagonist (as pointed out by Birgit Beumers).

Thus, the "key" song of the film that starts and ends it is a song about "lost wings," a sad parable of lost hope and love.[39] Beumers writes:

> Nautilus' songs are about another reality, daydreams, making this other reality a good one, and about the crippling effect of this reality – the wings that enable man to fly have been lost and all that remains are scars (85).

At the same time the soundtrack does not tell us any story in the conventional sense of coherency of time and space, but rather presents us with random, generally quite depressing song lines. Thus, the soundtrack serves as a descriptive narrative, accompanied by the visual imagery of Petersburg's slimy underbelly (trashy yards, the cemetery, the bums' dwelling places, dark apartments, criminal headquarters). If in chernukha of the perestroika period the means of description served the visual excess of the chernukha art mode, in *Brother* the description reaches the climax of detachment from the narrative and a lack of any message that could be attributed to the film as a holistic system of stylistic and narrative devices. This discrepancy within the narrative frame of the story presents the descriptive mode of the film as the disintegration of the narrative. Being the subjective mode of the representation, the soundtrack, in fact, does not represent the personal perspective of the protagonist, but rather presents a pattern of deviation and abnormality within the narrative, destroying the coherency of the objective narrative and introducing discrepancy to the subjective viewpoint.

That disintegration is further emphasized by the structure of the film, which is shot in consecutive episodes ending with a fadeout, when the new scene starts as if "from a blank sheet."[40] This technique achieves two major effects: firstly, in the tradition of chernukha "typage" structures, it conventionally alludes to each new scene as an episode, descriptive of some typical, usually socially bound, situation. For example, the scene of the mafia plotting the murder of the Chechen Godfather exemplifies the life of the underworld; Danila's adventures at a punk youth party serves as a typology of bohemian youth culture. Those descriptive scenes pay homage, in a way, to the chernukha tradition in its neo-naturalist form, as seen in *Little Vera*. Secondly, and most importantly, the disruptive "blackout" structure serves as a means of deconstructing the narrative coherency and creating the effect of decentralization and disintegration. Each new episode starts as if Danila Bagrov begins a new life and a new adventure disconnected with the others. That impression is achieved primarily through the representation of the protagonist, whose actions do not have any coherent, persistent motivation that could be described in terms of continuity. It is important to note that the deconstruction of traditional narrative is an attribute of postmodern aesthetics, which emphasize the inconsistent non-structural elements within the system (such as the story) and subvert the realistic mode of representation.

Evgeny Margolit attributes this "clip-like treatment" to the manifestation of the absence of moral values in Danila's world, when right and wrong are judged from the perspective of moral relativism. I believe that, regardless of Balabanov's intentions of condemning his immoral protagonist, the primary task of the fadeout structure is to further re-emphasize the disintegrating texture of the cinematic narration of Danila's story. The ambiguous attitude of Russian critics exemplified by Margolit lies within the misinterpreted conventions, which is analogous to the treatment of Sorokin's oeuvre, whose épatage and shocking use of violence and obscenity are perceived as an assault on the values of the society and a call for moral relativism (a call to engage literally in cannibalism, incest, murder etc). Balabanov's morally indifferent hero, who kills cold-bloodedly and is at the same time presented as a noble knight, was not treated with any particular enthusiasm by critics.

Film, just like literature in the post-Soviet condition, is expected to fall under some category of sanctity concerning the salvation of the confused nation. On the contrary, in postmodern fashion, just like Sorokin's fiction, Balabanov's film projects an ambiguous attitude towards morality, a value system or any other discursive inscriptions art is supposed to fulfil. The "new" Russian cinema and literature deliberately set themselves apart from the traditionalist perception of art, characteristic of Russian and Soviet cultures, in which art was regarded as having the prophetic mission of educating rather than entertaining. The misinterpreted conventions striving for realism condemn art by Sorokin or Balabanov as insufficient to provide a message and to pronounce judgement on good and evil.

Like Vladimir Sorokin's fiction, *Brother* could also be placed in the category of postmodern art. Firstly, the power of a subversive strategy is as present in *Brother* as it is in the conceptual writings of Sorokin. As noted above, *Brother* subverts the traditional realistic conventions of coherent narrative and authorial stand. There is also a subtle subversion of genre conventions: Danila represents a strange hero-figure, living in a dream-like world of rock music, acting upon spontaneous impulses with an absence of self-awareness. In fact, such an image of a hero denies all generic conventions of the hero as assertive, driven by self-motivation, having desires and achieving them. Bordwell and Thompson specifically mention "desire" as a category for the action of a protagonist and therefore development of the plot. I call this subversion *subtle* because the film was largely perceived and approved of by audiences as an action film that could satisfy the general public. Balabanov seems to belong to the category of postmodern directors who cater to the common taste for pop-culture as well as subvert that taste through the unsettledness of generic formulas within their oeuvre. Tarantino is another example of that tendency, winning a *Palm d'Or* at Cannes along with the hearts and minds of Russian teenagers, for example.

Another important aspect of the postmodern subversion is the debunking of the Soviet hero mythology, as when Danila presents a new type of hero, which Birgit Beumers calls a "criminal knight." Therefore, the subversion of discursive constructions in *Brother* happens on the level of structure, genre conventions and the image of the protagonist, who is neither an action-thriller "hero" nor a hero of Soviet mythology. He is not an anti-hero either, existing in an experimental *roman nouveau* which subverts the canonical vision of the protagonist or narrator. Thus, a novel by Italo Calvino could be written in second person narration, and prose by Natalie Sarrot blurs the boundaries between narrative instances narrator, protagonist and author. I argue that the protagonist of *Brother* is a "chernukha hero," when chernukha becomes a mode of manifestation of the heterogeneous subject.

As mentioned above, the film lacks a unified coherent vision: objective reality is distorted by the descriptive soundtrack, which also does not provide a unified subjective perspective to tell Danila's story, but rather disperses the subjectified vision in the random pattern of parable-like songs. Thus, the spectators witness long shots of Danila making dangerous weapons out of scratch with the songs in background (an ironic play on the action films, in which the characters usually buy or find fancy guns). However, Danila persistently denies these actions when he insists that he was serving at Battalion Headquarters, not in Chechnya. In fact Danila always positions himself somewhere in between of what is expected from him. Being a professional killer, he does not admit his ability to kill. When he accidentally penetrates the rock musicians' bohemian environment he cannot stay there and leaves after he is given an aspirin (the reason he appears among the Olympian company).[41] He makes friends with Kate, a punk, but rejects her environment. Finally, his relationship with Sveta fails despite his best efforts and she chooses her abusive husband over Danila's elusive persona. Danila rejects any type of role assigned to him by external circumstances; he does not project his own will upon his life, giving the impression that he is strolling in a dream through the streets of Saint Petersburg.

There is the recurrent image of the kind of streetcar that Sveta drives, the peculiarity of the streetcar is that it is not passenger tram, but is, instead, a utility vehicle: hollow, with a metal carcass resembling the streetcar structure. However, in the film it acquires a metonymic and metaphoric meaning. Metonymically, the "hollow streetcar" stands for Sveta, metaphorically it signifies Danila's marginal status. The streetcar appears during crucial moments in Danila's adventures: it comes to save his life after the shooting, it appears again when Danila starts a romance with Sveta, and it is the last thing that Danila sees when he leaves Saint Petersburg. The hollow streetcar, which is not a streetcar in the strict sense, as it cannot serve as public transportation, stands for the protagonist's heterogeneous identity.

Being a "heterogeneous subject," *Brother's* protagonist fails to fit in the cultural inscriptions that are offered during his adventures. Danila is a passive hero, who accepts any task that falls on his shoulders. The only active position he takes is rejection of any fixed identity. If in Sorokin's story the heterogeneity manifests itself through the employment of the excessive and violent annihilation of linguistic constructs, *Brother* seemingly does not project the extremities of violence, but instead offers a total negation of culturally or socially inscribed status. Danila is a hero of nowhere, his place is not determined, his agenda is obscure, his personality is elusive and ambiguous, representing the fluctuation between family values and pity for the innocent (when he saves the unfortunate Sveta, who happens to be at the scene of crime) and the ability to kill without hesitation or a second thought.

Danila is a perfect heterogeneous subject because he is not a "subject" at all: his subjective vision is replaced by the rock music, he cannot express himself because there is no "self" to express. Danila rarely talks and, when he does, his speech does not make much sense to those around him. Thus, when his brother is trying to convince him to shoot Chechen Godfather for the sake of Russian people that work at the market, he absent-mindedly asks whether the Germans will have a place in the market, referring to Hoffman, which makes no sense to his brother. Danila's fascination with *Nautilus*' music does not appeal to Sveta, leaving a communicational void between them. In short, whatever Danila does or says does not fit with the communicational or representational patterns he is supposed to subscribe to. The question remains, however, why this misplaced heterogeneous hero could be regarded as chernukha hero.

Brother contains a few elements of chernukha aesthetics. As I have mentioned above, there is a strong descriptive quality in the film, manifested by the distorted narrative patterns through the omnipresent soundtrack. There is also the strong presence of "typage" elements that allude to the naturalist tendency within chernukha art. However, unlike chernukha of the perestroika period, which is represented by the negative excess of the visual violence and representational failure, *Brother* represents an additional step towards transgression into the field of heterogeneous. Not featuring so much violence, death or obscene sexuality, *Brother* still represents "the ultimate transgression."

In Sorokin's case that transgression was a leap into the representational void. That void is different from representational failure, as in the chernukha literature of perestroika, or the communicational failure depicted by Petrushevskaia, which still in many respects subscribes to the realist tradition and presents communicational breakdown, but without the conscious annihilation of all elements of speech, style and narrative construction.

Brother establishes a mode of ultimate transgression through the leap beyond the marginal or taboo status. The negative excess of chernukha is manifested and intensified through the postmodern poetics of heterogeneity, which goes beyond marginality as a socially inscribed status. Thus, *Brother* is filled with marginal personages (an abused woman, ruthless criminals, bums), but Danila's misplaced and dispersed identity fails to fit in with any of the marginal representations usually explored by chernukha art. In one of the last scenes of the film Danila offers money to his German friend, Hoffman, who is a representative of the marginalized homeless community that lives in a cemetery.

Hoffman rejects Danila's money, implicitly rejecting his position beyond marginality, beyond the limits of cultural inscription. It is significant that Sveta rejects Danila, too, refusing to go with him and preferring her marginal status of abused wife to his transgressive identity. In this way *Brother* moves beyond the communicational breakdown and ambivalent relationship of the two marginal protagonists of *Taxi Blues*. The difference between *Brother* and *Taxi Blues* lies in the radical transgression beyond statuses and communicational failures within those statuses, it is not a subversion of the culturally and socially inscribed status but its annihilation, or rather, dispersion.

Chernukha's negative excessive vision transforms in *Brother* into a transgression that goes beyond social or cultural margins, presenting Danila as a "chernukha hero," a representation of transgressive status that does not acquire any culturally or socially comprehensive form. Therefore, *Brother* presents the spectator with a postmodern heterogeneous subject, whose ambiguous position is manifested through the mode of chernukha art – excessive transgression beyond the margins of cultural inscription.

Conclusion

In my thesis I have examined the chernukha phenomenon as it exists in contemporary Russian culture. I have tried to trace the presence of the chernukha art mode in diverse perestroika texts with different cultural statuses as well as to analyze the transformation chernukha undergoes when appropriated by those texts. My other objective was to see whether chernukha art manifests itself in contemporary fiction and film, namely within the framework of a trend which could be called postmodernism. I have argued that chernukha bears an essentially transgressive nature that transgresses boundaries of trend, genre and time period. Being a flexible phenomenon, chernukha art still constitutes a unified tendency with core defining characteristics of negative excessive vision addressed specifically to the marginal and obscene phenomena of emphasized physicality and abjection, a subversive quality of failed social and cultural representations and inscriptions, inversed cultural values and broken communication within the chernukha world.

Negative vision as the conceptual unity of chernukha art manifests itself primarily on the level of narrative and stylistic strategies, on the level of form rather than solely through thematic focus on obscene topics, which is usually attributed to chernukha. Analysis of the chernukha art mode demonstrates its ties with the traditions within Russian art of the 19th century, namely the natural school, the traditions of which focus on the social environment, physiological description and pay attention to the "low" daily manifestations of life which were appropriated by chernukha as its narrative strategy in terms of content. I have divided my analysis into three parts, dedicated to chernukha in literature, film and postmodern aesthetics respectively.

In my analysis of literary works I have demonstrated that the chernukha phenomenon in Russian literature is far more complex than is usually perceived through content analysis. As much as chernukha represents a diverse phenomenon in Russian culture, ranging from hardcore porn to unethical PR and "black" media discourse, it is widely appropriated by contemporary Russian writers. I have shown that chernukha literature exists in different works as a unified phenomenon, characterized primarily by the mode of negative excess (be it stylistic excess of neo-naturalism; excessive inversion of the social and individual in Vladimir Makanin's work; or the grotesque excess of Liudmila Petrushevskaia) and the representational failure of cultural or ideological constructs or, in Petrushevskaia's work, the negation of any communicational instances and cultural inscriptions. Chernukha in literature proved to have strong ties with naturalism of the 19th century, from which it inherited the dialectic of the individual versus environment, attention to daily detail, a focus on unpleasant and marginal phenomena. However, the chernukha art mode also proved to be a transgressive phenomenon, which cannot be confined within the perestroika era and naturalist tendencies. Works by Makanin and Petrushevskaia exemplify chernukha's gradual transcendence of naturalist tendencies as well as from the documentary-like sensational denunciatory genres of perestroika.

The film analysis proved chernukha to be a transgressive and flexible phenomenon. It is present in the scandalous, chernukha cult-film, such as *Little Vera*, which is realist in narration and naturalist in its intention of depicting a trend of youth culture; in *Taxi Blues*, ambiguous in its intention and cultural status, which presents complex intertextual links to Russian cultural "common places;" and in the elitist *Second*

Circle, a non-narrative, experimental production. Chernukha functions within all three diverse productions as the mode of excessive negative vision. In film it is presented as an abundance of physicality on screen and repetitive patterns, which have the effect of "return in double," meaning that circumstances become worse and worse (see the discussion of Kierkegaard's concept of repetition in Chapter II). The technique that reinforces negative vision is the dominance of the descriptive mode, which designates background and setting, sound and colour as more determinant and significant for the film than the actual action. Another manifestation is representational failure and communicational breakdown, which is present in all chernukha films and in chernukha literature, inverting cultural values and undermining cultural signification.

In the last part of my thesis I have exemplified the transformation that chernukha art underwent with the advancement of postmodern aesthetics on the Russian cinematic and literary scene. The chernukha artistic mode did not vanish with the era of glasnost but, on the contrary, the essential characteristics of chernukha art continue to exist in contemporary Russian fiction and film in conjunction with postmodern aesthetics. Thus, a postmodern vision of heterogeneity as the domain of the "unpresentable" and Sublime as well as the conception of subjectivity as heterogeneous and unstable finds its manifestations in chernukha's excessively negative vision, intensified through the subversion of dominant discursive forms (such as narrative coherency, realistic conventions, linguistic referentiality and the totalitarian nature of representation). Chernukha in literature and film proved itself to be a transgressive, adaptable phenomenon, as attested to by implications of chernukha in a text by Sorokin and a film by Balabanov. Furthermore, with its essential transgressive drive as an art mode that breaks taboos and represents the failure of discursive representations and communicational breakdowns, chernukha art acquires new qualities within the postmodern context. That quality is "ultimate transgression" into the heterogeneous domain of intensified negativity, which results in a representational void of pure violence and the annihilation of linguistic representation in Sorokin's postmodern fiction and in transgression beyond the limits of culturally inscribed marginality or taboo into the ambiguous space of the heterogeneous subject in Balabanov's postmodern film.

The results of the present research prove chernukha to be a more complex and interesting phenomenon than usually perceived. That opens up new possibilities for the expansion of the research as well as for comparative study. If in the present work I narrowed my efforts to the manifestations of chernukha in art exemplified through several authors, in my future research I plan to examine the chernukha phenomenon as a whole: it's literary and cinematic styles, historical roots, diverse cultural connotations and the comparative cross-cultural ties it might have with other phenomena in literature and film. I also intend to provide a more thorough theoretical explanation of the chernukha phenomenon's existence and persistent presence in contemporary Russian culture, which I hope to gear towards the mechanisms that culture and art use to appropriate the abject and deal with the obscene and disgust. To link chernukha's excessive negative qualities to the concept of disgust (Wilson 2002, Menninghaus 2003) will be another interesting topic to explore. I also intend to perform a comparative analysis of chernukha art and American *film noir*, which, I believe, share many intersecting characteristics.

Comparative analysis of American *film noir* and Russian chernukha is located within historical, thematic and generic, and formal domains. The historical and political background of *film noir*, emerging as an art reflecting on societal problems in a period of national crisis (after World War II in the United States), suggests connections with the situation in Post-Soviet Russia. The thematic elements of *noir* are essentially the same as the main topics of chernukha (with the exclusion of obscenity) such as: the themes of crime and corruption; a dark vision of society; emphasis on sexuality and violence and others. Both chernukha and *film noir* share the problem of ambiguous definition. The generic nature of *film noir* is still debated by critics: whether it is a genre (Foster Hirsch, 1988); a sub-genre of the "tough thriller" (Frank Krutnik, 1991); a visual style (Silver and Ward, 1979); a social critique (Jon Tuska, 1984); or a mood and a tone (Paul Schrader, 1977). I hope to prove that analogous to chernukha, *noir* is a transgressive phenomenon exceeding boundaries of genre and school. That premise is formulated from the perspective of a constant revitalization of *noir* elements within contemporary Western cinema (*neo-noir*). The expected result of that research could be a better understanding of both phenomena and the nature of their transgression.

I see the importance of continuous exploration of chernukha phenomenon in the examination of a phenomenon peculiar to Russian culture, which has been largely neglected or oversimplified by academic criticism. A comparative analysis as well as examination of diverse manifestation of chernukha in Russian culture will help to provide insights, not only into chernukha, but also into the phenomena of *film noir* and create a cross-cultural textual field useful for a theoretical understanding of abject phenomena and the ways our culture appropriates them.

Endnotes

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[1] Mikhail Bakhtin makes similar points with the reference to carnival culture, which is also a legitimate time for breaking the rules of the social order. For Bakhtin the carnival transgression bears the nature of the liberating laughter and return to the archaic origins. Those origins are emphasized in the images of laughing pregnant old women, which combine the death related physicality of old age and the state of giving birth, pointing to the mythological cycle of life. See *Rabelais and His World* (1984). See the discussion of grotesque in the works by Liudmila Petrushevskaia in the first chapter for more details.

[2] Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky, Seth Graham, Anna Lawton and other critics, mostly North American, analyzed chernukha as a cinematographic phenomenon.

[3] "The harsh or 'tough' prose…verges on naturalism and physiological sketch. It is close in tone and diction to the so-called… 'cruel prose', and to 'chernukha,' the profane slang used to portray the seamy sides of Russian life. Harsh prose is close in spirit to the so-called… 'denunciatory prose,' the objective of which is to uncover the transgressions and abuse of power by the former Soviet regime." (*Russian Literature*, 1988-1994, 45).

[4] "Village prose" is a literary trend in Soviet fiction, which started out in late 1960s, characterized by realist narration, and most of all by a focus on rural life. Village prose glorified the image of Russian provincial village life, propagating returning to the roots and preserving national culture, which indicated trend's inclination towards the Slavophil ideology. The main representatives are Valentin Rasputin and Viktor Astafiev.

[5] All critics agree that Petrushevskaia possesses a unique voice within contemporary Russian literature, for a description of the elite status of her work and their high quality see Western authors such as Helena Goscilo, Sally Dalton-Brown, and Russian critics such as Natalia Ivanova, Mark Lipovetsky and others.

[6] All translations are made by Peter Larson, PhD candidate in Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Alberta, unless otherwise noted.

[7] Mark Lipovetsky, Konstantin Kustanovich, film critics such as Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky, Seth Graham.

[8] Kustanovich argues that the naturalists believed in the power of descriptive detail rather than in detail as the vehicle of the plot development, referring to Zola.

[9] I will discuss the issue of metatextuality within the novel in the next few pages. The Russian literary tradition is explicitly referred to by Petrovich as to a mechanism of manipulation and domination (the bad conscience, "Raskolnikov syndrome") as well as the only space where he, as an underground writer and his friends can exist. The space of

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cultural value represented by Russian literary tradition vanishes with the advances of capitalism and reformation of Russian society.

[10] Michael Riffaterre writes: "Repetition indicates that a person [a character]…is now translated into things…and [repetition] is…the technical means for the narrative to progress" (20).

[11] Petrovich's obsession with shoes is an allusion to canonic novella by Nikolai Gogol *Shinel* [The Overcoat] (1842), where the protagonist's death is caused by an obsession with an overcoat, a symbol of different status and lifestyle. Moreover, the name "Petrovich" is the name of the tailor on Overcoat who seduces the humble protagonist into dreams of a better life. Obviously those allusions are a deliberate artifice and are an example of intertextual play present in abundance within the novel. I gratefully acknowledge input of Professor Peter A. Rolland from the University of Alberta for pointing out the connection with Gogol.

[12] I understand *grotesque* according to Philip Thomson's definition as the relationship of "unresolved clash of incompatibles," in which the core characteristic of grotesque, the abnormal is shown as ambivalent, and grotesque itself could be defined as "ambivalently abnormal."

[13] For example, I as a reader or a critic would not suggest that the narrator is drastically myopic about her son's future; however, I cannot deny that there are clues and deceiving hints that might provoke that thought (see Goscilo). Again, Sally Dalton-Brown in her book on Petrushevskaia gives a completely different interpretation. The interesting fact here is not that there are many interpretations, but that this interpretational uncertainty develops on the simplest level of fabula, i.e. critics have hard time determining what happened in the story.

[14] See works by Sally Dalton-Brown, Helena Goscilo, and Konstantin Kustanovich.

[15] "Алеша, я думаю, приедет ко мне в первый день пасхи, я с ним так мысленно договорилась, показала ему дорожку и день, я думаю, он догадается, он очень сообразтительный мальчик, и там, среди крашных яиц, среди пластмассовых венков и помятой, пьяной и доброй толпы, он меня простит, что я не дала ему попрощаться, а ударила его по лицу вместо благословения. Но так лучше -- для всех. Я умная, я понимаю" (295).
"Alesha, I think, will visit me on the first day of Easter, that's what I mentally agreed to with him, showing him the way and the day. I think he'll figure it out, he's a very perceptive boy, and there among the painted eggs, among the plastic wreaths and the rumpled, drunken, kind crowd he'll forgive me for not having let him say good-bye, and for hitting him on the face instead of blessing him. But it's better this way – for everybody. I'm smart, I understand things" (24).

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[16] On the issue of Glasnost literature's high interest in the tabooed zones of Soviet ideology (such as concealed and altered vision of the past) resulting in the profaning of literary quality in favor of journalistic qualities, such as sensation and novelty, see Helena Goscilo "Introduction" to the *Glasnost Literature Anthology*.

[17] Anna Lawton writes: "The critics have invented a term for the naturalistic trend focusing on problems with unrelieved gloom: chernukha, which means "painted in dark colors," but it also has a condescending overtone indicating poor quality and exploitation of the subject for commercial purposes" (206).

[18] "As a temporary stage in the process of liberation, this semigenre may produce inventive movies struggling for freedom of speech. What it certainly cannot give us is a model of filmic language that could provoke a search for and that might be identified with genre in the classical, though not antiquated sense" (Horton & Brashinsky, 165).

[19] This division originates in the Russian Formalist theory of *fabula* and *siuzhet*. The Story is what actually happens in the text, governed by its internal temporal and spatial logic. Discourse refers to what happens outside of the time of the story, which includes, for example, the presentation and duration of the work of art. The text-types of Description and Argument are especially important in relation to the Discourse, because they are often not included within the timeframe or the space of the story but still manufacture the perception and structure of the text. The other terms are those of story and plot (Bordwell); to avoid confusion I will resort to Chatman's terminology.

[20] See Lawton, p. 192.

[21] Such documentaries are: Yuri Podnieks' *Legko li Byt Molodym?* [Is it Easy to be Young] (1987), Mark Soosaar's *Zhizn Bez...* [A Life Without] (1987); or *Ispoved: Khroniki Otchuzhdeniia* [Confession: Chronicle of Alienation] (dir. George Gabriela, 1988).

[22] See the synopses of the films discussed in this chapter in the appendix.

[23] That statement was uttered by one of the female audience members in response to a romance-related question on one of the first cooperative television shows with the U.S. in the early years of Glasnost.

[24] See Bordwell and Thompson's gradations of long, medium and close-up shots. Close-up is the framing of a human face; medium close-up – frames a human figure from chest and up; medium shot – from the waist and up, long shot – from the knees and up.

[25] See Tatyana Moskvina's article on Little Vera "Forward, Singing" in *Russian Critics on the Cinema of Glasnost* (ed. by Horton and Brashinsky).

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[26] The issue of constructed identities is directly related to the concept of power and knowledge distribution by Michel Foucault. However, I do not intend to expand on it due to their slight relevance to the topic discussed.

[27] I do not remember those being set up in the early 1990s, so they could be specifically put up for the production, which make it more significant.

[28] This point is also made by Seth Graham in his analysis of chernukha films, specifically Tamara Alexandrovna's *Husband and Daughter* (Graham, 13-15).

[29] From that conceptual point Sokurov includes *The Second Circle* as part of a trilogy with his other two films about death and mourning (*The Stone* (1992) and *Silent Pages* (1993)). I do not include those films in the present study because my primary task is to establish a link to chernukha aesthetics and exemplify their presence in the film rather than analyze the conceptual unity of the triptych by the famous director.

[30] See Mark Lipovetsky's *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos* published in New York in 1999, and Viacheslav Kuritsyn's article "Postmodernism: the New Primitive Culture" in *Re-Entering the Sign* (1995).

[31] For the connection between the concepts of heterogeneity and postmodernism see Julian Pefanis' *Heterology and the Postmodern: Bataille, Baudrillard, and Lyotard* (1991).

[32] All the works of so-called poststructuralist thinkers, such as Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Jacque Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacque Lacan, Jean-François Lyotard, Julia Kristeva and others in one way or another exploit that notion of "representational failure" and the absence of the ontological referent. However, to go into a lengthy philosophical discussion would be counterproductive to the objectives of this work. I will underline the most important aspects that will be used in conjunction with discussion of chernukha, with certain, more-relevant references, but generally regardless of the rich philosophical background that almost all of those points entail.

[33] In "What is Postmodernism?" See Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. Pp.71-82.

[34] Nietzsche refers to the "veil of Maya" in relation to Arthur Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation*, whose influence on Nietzschean thought is well known.

[35] See the edition in Russian: *Dictionary of the Terms of Moscow Conceptual School*, edited by Andrei Monastyrsky. Moscow: Ad Marginem, 1999.

[36] The application of genre cinema to the Russian contemporary context is an observation made by many film critics, such as D. Dondurei, N. Zorkaia, Z. Abdullaeva and many

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others working in the most influential Russian cinema journal *The Art of Cinema* (Iskusstvo Kino), which constantly features analytical articles and film reviews on contemporary cinema, film theory and history.

[37] That reminds me of the principles the scholarly works had to be written in the Soviet academia. One was relatively free to choose a "safe" topic. However, before discussing any methodology or criticism in the field, the scholars were obliged to cite Marx or Lenin and the "decisions" of the last Session of the Communist Party even if it had no relevance to the topic. It constituted the "right" angle from which to approach any scientific inquiry.

[38] *Brother 2* is the sequel and is quite different from its predecessor. Both films, in my opinion, employ postmodern aesthetics. However, *Brother 2* is made in the fashion of a postmodern collage and is a mix of diverse genres and styles, being an ironic pastiche playing with the notions of "high" and "low" culture and consciously experimenting with kitsch. Due to its specifically playful and eclectic aesthetics *Brother 2* is harder to identify with the chernukha mode, if possible to make such identification at all. That is why I am limiting myself to the original Brother.

[39] «Ты снимаешь вечернее платье, стоя лицом к стене, и я вижу свежие шрамы на гладкой как бархат спине. Мне хочется плакать от боли или забыться во сне, где твои белые крылья, которые нравились мне?» (*Наутилус Помпилиус*, «Крылья»). You take off your evening dress, turning your face to the wall, and I see the recent scars on the back as smooth as velvet. I want to cry of pain or fall into the all-forgetting dream, where are you white wings that I admired so much? (*Nautilus Pompilius*, "Wings")

[40] A quote from Evgeny Margolit's article "Plach po Pioneru ili Nemetskoe slovo "Iablokitai," published in *Isskustvo Kino* 2 (1998) [The Lament for the Pioneer, or the German Word "Iablokitai"], *Cinema Art* 2 (1998); cited in Beumers, 85.

[41] One interesting fact is that the ambiguous status of the soundtrack and the songs that wrap up the narrative is reinforced by Danila's visit to the house of his idol, *Nautilus'* leader – Viacheslav Butusov. When stunned Danila wanders around the house looking at all Russian rock idols in one place, not one of them actually sings a song. They do sing, but an unidentified tune with no words. The fact is that they can sing only in Danila's head, not in reality, the songs disrupt the narrative, not support it.

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Appendix.

Little Vera.
Directed by Vassily Pichul; screenplay by Marina Khmelik; cinema by Efim Reznikov. Cast: Natalia Negoda, Andrei Sokolov, Liudmila Zaitseva, Yury Nazarov.
USSR, 1988.

The film starts with a long introductory shot of an industrial city. The story starts in the kitchen, where we see Vera's father and mother arguing about Vera's behavior while loud pop music emanates from Vera's room. Vera is 17; she has just graduated form high school. As the story progresses, Vera and her best friend go to a discotheque, where they meet Sergei, a handsome student from Moscow who seeks entertainment. Sergei invites Vera over. Vera's romance progresses rapidly. Soon, her brother, on vacation from Moscow, finds out about the lovers. This revelation induces Sergei to state that he intends to marry Vera. However, this proposal is by no means made out of noble feelings or under pressure from Vera's family, but rather as a joke, a new twist in a game. To convince her parents of the necessity of marriage, Vera falsely states that she is pregnant. Sergei moves in with Vera's family. The communal life of the new couple together with Vera's parents does not going well. Sergei displays disrespect and a condescending attitude towards Vera's parents. At a birthday party for her father, Sergei and Vera's father fight. Sergei forces Vera's father into the bathroom and locks him up. Vera lets him out and her father, outraged and drunk, stabs Sergei, who is taken to the hospital in critical condition. The whole family tries to conceal the attempted murder and makes Vera testify against Sergei so that her father can claim selfdefense. Vera becomes extremely depressed, so her brother, urgently called in from Moscow, prescribes her tranquilizers, on which she eventually overdoses in an attempted suicide. However, her brother manages to save her, while Sergei, having lost much of his previous snobbism, runs from the hospital and comes to the troubled house. The film ends on an ambiguous note: Sergei and Vera sitting in her bedroom, seemingly reconciled, meanwhile, her father dies all alone in the kitchen of a heart attack at the break of dawn.

> ***Friend of the Deceased.***
> Directed by Viacheslav Krishtofovich; produced by Mykola Machenko, Pierre Rival; screenplay by Andrei Kourkov; cinema by Vilen Kaluta. Cast: Alexander Lazarev, Tatiana Krivitska, Eugen Pachin. Ukraine-France, 1997.

The film starts with the scene of the protagonist, Sasha, trying to obtain a job by calling potential employers on his broken phone, tied over with duct tape. Then the protagonist finds a new job, where he, a professional translator, has to give lessons to nouveau riche businessman. Soon we understand that Sasha's wife has a successful career and that she takes pity on him by allowing him to live with her, though their relationship is over. Finally his wife takes off with her new boyfriend and the depressed protagonist goes to his old friend to drink away his despair. His friend tells him that he has an acquaintance who is a professional killer and who could "punish" his wife's boyfriend. The drunk protagonist agrees and sets up the job for the killer. Being extremely depressed he puts his own picture in the envelope instead of a picture of his wife's lover. Ready to die, he goes to his favourite café, waiting for the killer. But nothing happens and suddenly Sasha acquires the new taste for life. Finally he even manages to earn money by falsely testifying against another nouveau rich businessman's wife, pretending to be her lover. Not willing to die anymore, Sasha hires another killer to finish off the hit-man whom he hired previously. When that happens and the first hit-man is killed, the criminal chain of events breaks and the café where the killing takes place burns down. The protagonist again gets ready to die of the hands of the cruel mafia but nothing happens. Driven by remorse towards the deceased killer's family, Sasha visits his wife and a child. After the first visit, the wife of the deceased initiates another, during which she explicitly flirts with the protagonist. By that time Sasha has almost gone insane because of all his adventures. The last scene of the film is when the little son of the deceased killer utters his first word, "Papa," to the protagonist, his father's indirect murderer.

Taxi Blues.
Directed by Pavel Loungine; screenplay by Pavel Loungine; cinema by Denis Evstigneev. Cast: Piotr Mamonov, Piotr Zaichenko. USSR-France, 1990

Taxi Blues is the story of two men, engaged in a love/hate friendship wrought out of humiliation, slavery, hopelessness, sometimes compassion and sometimes loneliness. The working class Shlykov is a taxi-driver. He is cheated out of his due by Lesha, a saxophone player, who escapes without having paid his fare. However, Shlykov remembers the address that Lesha mentions while drunk and finds him. Shlykov beats Lesha up in a public restroom and takes his saxophone as a guarantee of payment. From that point, both men undergo different stages in their relationship. Shlykov quickly gives up on the hope of being paid and returns Lesha's saxophone, but this time Lesha, being an alcoholic and drug-addict, begs Shlykov for booze and ends up at his apartment, apparently to stay. Shlykov, in a way, enslaves Lesha by taking his passport away and making him work at the taxi park, washing cars, so that Lesha can pay off his growing debt (while drunk, Lesha let the water in the bathtub overflow, causing damage to the apartment one floor lower). Lesha has his first nervous breakdown and Shlykov becomes frightened, this is the first time we begin to understand that he grows to care for Lesha. Soon Lesha himself is not willing to go anywhere, it seems that he has adopted the life at Shlykov's communal apartment. Lesha stops playing the saxophone and helps Shlykov sell illegal booze to taxi passengers. The illusion of some sort of mutual trust and friendship is undermined when Lesha gets a chance to be heard by Western producers and is called to New York as a newly-discovered star. Shlykov eagerly waits for Lesha's triumphant return, but Lesha visits him disrespectful haste, bearing the insulting gift of a rubber sex-doll. Furious, Shlykov chases Lesha's taxi in his taxi, but he crashes into the taxi, only to find out that he was pursuing the wrong vehicle. The movie ends on the *post scriptum* note that Lesha was committed to a psychiatric ward in New York and Shlykov became a successful businessman.

The Second Circle.
Directed by Alexander Sokurov; screenplay by Yury Arabov; cinema by A.Burov.
Cast: Piotr Aleksandrov. USSR, 1990.

The Second Circle is the story of a young man who comes to visit his father in some small, remote Siberian industrial city, but finds a stiffened corpse in the apartment. The film evolves around the struggle of the young man during the mourning process and his attempts to bury his father, which turns out to be difficult, as the son was robbed on a bus. After some truly "Kafkaesque" perturbations (this term appeared on the promotion booklet of the Edmonton International Film Festival, which featured the film in its program) with the Soviet bureaucracy and indifference, the son sees his father buried (though we do not witness the actual process) and burns the old man's things in a dumpster.

Brother.
Directed by Alexei Balabanov; produced by Sergei Seliyanov; screenplay by Alexei Balabanov; cinema by Sergei Astakhov. Cast: Sergei Bodrov Jr., Viktor Sukhorukov. Russia, 1997.

The film starts with the protagonist, Danila Bagrov, walking onto the site of the shooting of a music video of the rock group *Nautilus Pompilius*. The music by this group will be a constant presence in the film from that moment on. Having been beaten up by the security staff, Danila enters the police station. Then, at home, his worried mother advises him to set off for Saint Petersburg, where his older brother lives, in order to find a job and a better future for himself. In Saint Petersburg Danila's brother, Viktor is a hired killer, working for the mafia. When Danila arrives and finds his brother, the latter gives Danila the risky job of killing a Chechen mafia boss, appealing to Danila's brotherly feelings. Danila undergoes a series of adventures, meeting different people: a punk girl Kat, and Hoffman, a bum of a German descent, whom Danila saves from a racketeer. Danila shows a great deal of military capacity and appears to be skillful with firearms and fighting, as he is engaged in violence from the moment he enters Saint Petersburg. Danila kills the Chechen through a carefully planned assault, but is wounded by Mafiosi in a setup, who intended to kill Viktor and not pay for the job. Hoffman nurses Danila's back to help. He meets a girl, Sveta, who is a tram driver and who always has a black eye from her abusive husband. Danila and Sveta become lovers. Eventually, Viktor gives Danila another job, once again pressing him for the brotherly help. Viktor is found by the mafia and gives Danila up; the bandits find Sveta, beat her and rape her. Outraged, Danila fashions himself a sawed-off shotgun and kills everybody except his brother, whom he sends back to their provincial town to help their mother. Returning for Sveta, Danila finds her abusive husband and shoots him in the leg. Sveta, however, rejects Danila and stays with her wounded husband. Danila leaves for Moscow alone, probably, to become a professional killer there.